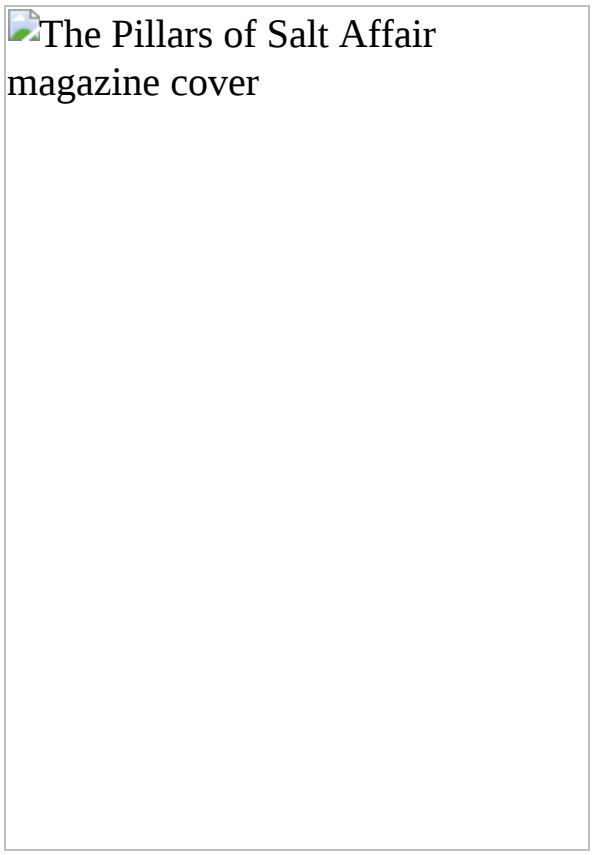

The Pillars of Salt Affair

By Bill Pronzini

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One day a stream of life-giving water, the next an evil ribbon of salt—could Illya and Solo entrap the mad monster who had sworn to turn the world's great waterways into death traps? THRUSH had its most monstrous weapon in its hands—and only U.N.C.L.E. stood in the way!

PROLOGUE
ACT I: MISSION SALT WATER
ACT II: DEATH LIVES HERE
ACT III: THE RIM OF HELL
ACT IV: NO ESCAPE
ACT V: ONE-WAY DEATH STREET
ACT VI: STAND AND FIGHT

PROLOGUE

The three men walked single-file, climbing steadily upward along a pine-needled path that wound through heavy growth of Douglas fir and Sitka spruce. Below them, nestled in a valley bounded by rising slopes of heavy timberland, was the small lumber community of Kamewa, Oregon, from where they had begun their climb.

Although it was only early afternoon, the shadows in the wood were long and deep. Thin shafts of pale sunlight filtered through the leafy ceiling above them, and the air was cool and moist.

As the three men walked, they could smell the fresh, mingling odors of the fir and spruce, and that of growing moss, ferns, sweet syringa and Oregon grape. The only sound was their quiet footfalls on the spongy cushion of the path.

The man in the lead was dressed in a plaid hunting cap and a bright red-and green lumber jacket. He carried a Winchester .270 deer rifle in the crook of his arm. The other two men wore similarly colored jackets, and carried small canvas knapsacks and binocular cases slung over their shoulders.

They paused for a moment to rest, nearly three-quarters of the way up. The darker of the two men carrying the knapsacks took a handkerchief from his khaki trousers and wiped his forehead. The man in the plaid hunting cap grinned.

"Not used to hiking in the woods, eh?" he asked. "How much further is it?" Napoleon Solo said, squatting to massage his aching ankles. His feet seemed to be suffocating inside his tight hiking boots. They had been walking for over an hour.

"Not far," the man in the plaid hunting cap said, answering his question. "About a quarter of a mile."

"It seems to me," Illya Kuryakin commented dryly, "that you said the same thing two miles back."

The man's grin widened. His name was Barney Dillon, and he was a foreman at the Kamewa Lumber Company, located at the northern end of the town below. He had agreed to act as their guide when they had arrived in Kamewa that noon.

"You'll be able to see it when we crest the slope," Dillon said.

"Are you sure we couldn't have ridden up?" Solo asked.

"We could have," Dillon said, "if the road had been open. But we had a slide day before yesterday. Can't figure how it happened, this being the dry season, but it happened all right. They're still trying to clear the road."

Solo stood and adjusted the knapsack on his back. He had held some doubts from the beginning as to the authenticity of the report that had brought them to this isolated logging community near the Oregon coast, but he reserved final judgment until they had seen the reservoir for themselves. If they had hiked all this way to gaze upon the shimmering blue waters of a man-made lake, he was going to have a few words to say to the people of Kamewa. But then there was the plain fact that no water, not a drop, ran from any of the taps and faucets in the town.

"Well," Solo said with a joviality he did not feel at the moment, "let's press onward shall we?"

They began to walk again, moving along the path. When they reached the crest of the slope, some fifteen minutes later, Barney Dillon picked his way through a clump of tangled, decaying juniper and stood on a wide, flat sandstone rock. Solo and Illya clambered up to stand beside him.

"There it is," Dillon said.

Below them, at the foot of a smaller slope that fell away much more gradually than the one they had just climbed, lay the reservoir they had

come to see. It was ringed with a thickly knit growth of fir and spruce.

Solo took the binoculars from the case on his shoulder and peered through them. The denseness of the trees afforded him sight of only patches of the reservoir, gleaming brightly in the sunlight.

He adjusted the glasses. It seemed to him that the gleam was not that of sun on water, not the bright silver shimmer of dancing light. It was more like, Solo thought, the blinding whiteness of sun on fresh snow, of sun on hot white beach sand.

He turned, looking at Illya Kuryakin. Illya brushed a strand of blond hair from his forehead and shrugged. He lowered his own glasses. He had gotten the same impression.

"Still the same," Dillon said. "Been that way since sometime last night."

"Let's go down for a closer look," Solo said.

They followed Barney Dillon as the big man picked his way down the slope. They had almost reached the bottom, were almost to the shoreline, when the growth thinned out enough to allow them a clear, unhindered view of the reservoir.

They stopped. It lay in front of them, a half-mile long and a quarter-mile wide. At the upper end, furthest away from where they stood, was the filtering plant, its pale green buildings shining dully in the sun. To one side lay the packed dirt road that led up from the town of Kamewa.

But Solo saw that with a cursory glance. His attention had been caught, and held, by the reservoir itself.

What he saw was not water.

What he saw was a solid white floor, unmoving, like the floor of a rock canyon. It shone a bleached, almost antiseptic white under the sun. The surface was irregular, almost but not quite flat, and its edges, where it

touched the shore, were smooth and planed, like cement that had been carefully spread with a trowel to blend with the sloping landscape.

Solo turned to Barney Dillon.

"Salt," Dillon said. "Pure rock salt"

"I don't believe it," Illya Kuryakin said.

"Neither did I, the first time I saw it."

They scrambled down the rest of the way to the edge of the reservoir. Dillon moved out to stand on the surface. "It's solid," he said. "We checked it this morning when we came out."

Solo and Illya followed him. They had begun to smell the salt now. It was not the fresh, pungent odor of ocean salt, but more the dry biting odor of processed sodium chloride.

The doubts Solo had held before vanished. It was salt, all right. But how was it possible? Only yesterday, Dillon had told him, the reservoir had been brimming with clean, fresh water fed from streams that wound down from the mountains. Only yesterday the people of Kamewa had been drinking that water, had been using it to wash their clothes and irrigate their gardens.

Napoleon Solo said, "you first began to notice the change last night?"

Barney Dillon nodded. "the tap water tasted tacky at first," he said. "then later, it became undrinkable. Like sea water. Finally, about ten o'clock, the water supply shut off completely."

"You came up to investigate this morning?"

"First thing," Dillon said. "This is what we found."

Solo shook his head, glancing around him at the white surface of the reservoir. "Pure water hardening, crystallizing into rock salt. It's a scientific impossibility."

"Well it happened," Dillon said. "You can see for yourself."

"I would be willing to wager," Illya said, "that this is not a natural phenomenon."

"Hmm," Solo said thoughtfully. "Some new kind of chemical, most likely. Synthetically made. But for what reason? What purpose would it serve to turn a small mountain reservoir like this one into salt?"

"I don't know," Illya said. "but I'm beginning to get an uneasy feeling."

"I think I know what you mean," Solo said pointedly. He dropped to one knee and swung the knapsack from his back. He took a small geologist's pick from inside and chipped a piece free from the surface. He picked it up, sniffing it, and then touched the tip of his tongue to it.

"It doesn't taste or smell any differently than common rock salt." He said. He put the chip in the knapsack and stood again. "I think we had best get this off to U.N.C.L.E. as soon as possible. Maybe our laboratory scientists can—"

The bullet missed him by inches.

He heard the crack of the high-powered rifle a split instant before the bullet struck just to his left, sending splinters of salt flying, and he had no time to react then. But before the echoes of that first shot had died amongst the trees, both he and Illya had hurled themselves forward, in a low running crouch, towards the cover afforded by the growth at the bank of the reservoir.

The high-powered rifle barked again and Barney Dillon, slower to react than the two trained U.N.C.L.E. agents, staggered and pitched forward. Solo cursed, reversing himself, and grabbed the fallen man under the arms, dragging him into the growth. Illya Kuryakin lay flat on his stomach behind a gnarled tree stump, his U.N.C.L.E. special held in his right hand.

"Did you see where the shots came from?" Solo breathed.

"Up there," Illya said, pointing off to their left, some one hundred yards further down and another hundred up the slope.

As if to confirm his words, the rifle sounded again, and another spray of salt kicked up near them at the shore line. Solo saw the flash of the shot, and caught a quick glimpse of sunlight glinting off a rifle barrel.

He looked at Barney Dillon. The big man groaned. "Are you all right?" Solo asked him.

"My leg," Dillon said between clenched teeth.

Solo saw the blood on the trousers of his khakis. The bullet had caught him in the fleshy part of the right thigh. The wound did not appear to be serious.

Illya was peering off into the dense growth of the firs high on the slope. "Apparently somebody doesn't want us investigating his handiwork," he said.

"Did you see anybody when you were here this morning?" Solo asked Dillon.

Dillon shook his head. "We were only here for a minute before we started back."

"You were probably being watched through field glasses," Solo said. "Whoever it is must have orders to stop anybody who tries to take a sample of that salt. You're lucky you didn't try that before."

Illya said "Napoleon."

Solo looked at him. Illya pointed directly above them to where a bank of juniper grew. "If I can get through there, I can cut across to the blind side from the top."

Solo nodded. "I'll take the shoreline." He turned to Dillon. "Can you handle your rifle?"

Dillon had somehow managed to hang on to the Winchester when he had fallen. "I can handle it," he said.

"I hope you're a good shot," Illya said.

Dillon managed a little grim. "Good enough," he said. He rolled onto his stomach, putting the stock of the Winchester to his shoulder. He squinted along the sights. "Any time you're ready."

They waited for a moment. It was very quiet. The earlier, incessant chatter of Oregon towhees and blackbirds nesting in the trees had halted completely now, and the woods were still and silent, waiting.

"Now!" Illya whispered.

Barney Dillon opened up with the Winchester, squeezing off a volley of shots. Illya scrambled to his feet and started up the slope, running in a zigzag crouch, legs driving for footholds on the slippery bank. The high-powered rifle cracked, and Illya halted, diving headlong into a thick pile of ferns and waxy Indian Pipe.

Solo felt the muscles in his stomach constrict, thinking perhaps his friend had been hit, but then he saw Illya come up again, running, almost as quickly as he had gone down. The rifle whanged again and Illya ducked into the safety of the juniper.

Solo let out a breath. He moved then, running as Illya had in a zigzag, keeping well into the protection of the scrub fir that grew at the shoreline. Behind him he heard Dillon's Winchester, and above and ahead of him the echoing answer of the high-powered rifle. A limb on a small white fir to his left splintered as he ran, and he felt the tug of an angry hornet at the sleeve of his lumber jacket. But he kept moving forward, body tensed, muscles in his legs and back straining.

He saw a large outcropping of rock ahead of him, and veered toward it. He threw himself forward, skidding onto his stomach behind the rock. A pair of rifles, firing almost simultaneously, flashed above him, and a bullet

ricocheted off the rock, whistling shrilly in his ears. A shower of dust fell on his neck.

Solo lay there for a moment, trying to get his breath. Two of them, he thought. He looked out around the side of the rock, peering upward. He could see nothing through the trees. He wondered where Illya was.

Behind him, Dillon squeezed off another shot from the Winchester. Two shots answered him almost immediately. Solo knew he must be almost directly beneath them now. And he knew as well that he could not stay where he was. His position was too vulnerable, the outcropping of rock affording only minimum protection.

To his left, he saw the long thick hulk of a felled Douglas fir. I was some thirty yards away, and further up the slope. Between it and the outcropping of rock was open ground. But if they were hidden in the trees higher up, it was just possible he could cross to the tree before they had a clear shot at him. He decided to change it. The U.N.C.L.E. agent got to his feet, bending in a low squat. Then he straightened and began to run.

He had gone fifteen of the thirty yards he needed, swiveling his body like a halfback threading his way through tacklers on a broken field run, when he saw them.

They had come down through the trees from their earlier position, and were moving towards him, two men in dark khakis. They noticed him at the same instant he saw them. They dropped to one knee, bringing his rifle up.

Solo was trapped. He knew he did not have enough time to reach the fallen tree before the man above him fired and his U.N.C.L.E. special was ineffective at this range. He did the only thing he could do.

In mid-stride, he allowed his body to go limp, dropping immediately, like a puppet with its strings cut. He brought the special up, knowing the uselessness of it, waiting for the shot and the bullet to plow into his body.

A shot rang out.

Solo, squinting upward from his prone position, saw the man with the high-powered rifle lean forward. He saw the rifle slip from the man's fingers, clattering down the spongy bank, and finally come to a halt only a few feet above where he lay. The man did not move.

Illya! Solo thought. The shot had come from above where the two men had been. He had made it around to them across the top of the slope.

The second man looked over his shoulder wildly, hesitating, and then began to run diagonally along the slope upward and to the west. Solo steadied his gun on his left arm and fired after the running man.

But the man ducked into thickly grown fir trees, and his shot missed. Two more shots sounded, from a revolver, and Solo knew that Illya was firing at the man as well. He saw a flash of color to his right and a blonde head emerged into view, giving chase after the fleeing man.

Solo stood. He knew he had no opportunity to catch the man himself. He walked to the body of the one Illya had shot.

He knelt down beside the man, examining him. He was short, with a balding head and sparse, pink eyebrows. Illya's bullet had taken him neatly through the side of the head, and he was quite dead. Solo had never seen him before.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent rummaged through the man's pockets. He found no identification, not even a wallet. But in the breast pocket of the lumber jacket the man wore, Napoleon Solo found a folded slip of paper.

He straightened, unfolding the paper. Printed on it were two lines of strange markings. They seemed to Napoleon Solo like an odd mixture of Morse code and Egyptian hieroglyphics. He heard footfalls and looked up. Illya was moving down towards him. He stopped next to Solo, panting a little.

"Lost him," Illya said. "Disappeared into the trees."

"What do you make of this?" Solo asked, handing him the paper.

Illya looked at it. "Code," he said.

"Yes," Solo said. "THRUSH code, unless I miss my guess."

"I rather thought I detected the cry of a small bird in the area," Illya said blandly.

Solo nodded. "What do you suppose this is all about?"

"I don't know," Illya said. "But if THRUSH is back of it, you know the rest Napoleon."

"I imagine Mr. Waverly will be interested in what's happened here today," Solo said. "We'd better get this code and the salt sample off to him right away."

"What about our friend there?"

"We'll send somebody back for him. He won't be going anywhere."

A hoarse shout sounded from their right. They turned. Barney Dillon came hoddling towards them, using his Winchester for a crutch. He was waving his free arm frantically.

They waited for him.

"You two all right?" he said when he reached them.

"Considering," Illya said.

"Well come on then," Dillon said. "You're not going to believe this."

"Believe what?" Solo asked.

But Dillon had already started down the slope. Solo looked at Illya, who shrugged. They followed him. They wound their way down through the trees, nearing the shoreline. The woods thinned out. The three men stopped abruptly, and Dillon pointed out towards the reservoir.

"Well?" he said. "What do you think of that?"

Solo and Illya stared.

"I think," Illya said with a resigned sigh after a moment, "that U.N.C.L.E. is in for another nasty battle, and that Napoleon and I are going to be right in the middle of it."

The surface of the reservoir before them was a deep blue-green color now, catching the sunlight from above in silver, dancing sparkles, and gentle, tiny waves of fresh, clear water lapped at the shoreline.

As if by some weird magic, the crystallized salt they had stood upon only a few minutes before had been transformed, and the water of the reservoir returned miraculously to its original state.

ACT I: MISSION SALT WATER

U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in Manhattan is an innocuous and unpretentious complex outwardly, including a tailor shop, an elaborate but artificial international aid organization, and The Mask club, a restaurant patterned after the many key clubs throughout the United States.

But beneath this facade is a fortress of concrete and steel. There are only four entrances, one of which is through secret tunnels from the river, and each of these is guarded by armed men and the ultimate in protective and alarm devices.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin stood on the sidewalk in front of the main entrance to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters—Del Floria's tailor shop. They had just departed a taxi from Kennedy International Airport following their return flight from Oregon.

Both men were tired, having had little sleep the night before. After they had gotten Barney Dillon back to Kamewa the previous afternoon and, with some argument, to a doctor to have his leg checked, they had reported to Mr. Waverly in New York and had been instructed to make a thorough search of the area surrounding the reservoir.

One of the townspeople had volunteered to take the coded message and the salt sample to the nearest city for immediate transport to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. Solo and Illya, accompanied by a group of armed loggers from the Kamewa Lumber Company, had then spent the intervening hours until nightfall in making a complete canvass of the timberland. They had found nothing—no camp sites, no evidence of hurried departure, no signs at all that anyone had even been in the area. The second man who had fired on them, and whoever else had been with him, had vanished, leaving no traces.

Now, the two agents crossed the sidewalk and entered the tailor shop. Since their efforts had been fruitless, they were hopeful that something of help had been unearthed by U.N.C.L.E. operations at this end.

Del Floria greeted them. As unpretentious as the facade, he was a tall, spare man in his early fifties, beginning to bald at the crown of his head. His manner was mild, almost meek, but hidden behind his light gray eyes was a photographic memory and a cat-like alertness that missed very little.

Del Floria knew every U.N.C.L.E. agent by sight. Should anyone not known to him attempt to gain entrance to the inner complex, he would have been immediately prevented and seized. For matters of his own safety and his invaluability to U.N.C.L.E., Del Floria knew nothing of what went on within the steel walls.

After exchanging amenities, Solo and Illya stepped into one of the small fitting rooms on one side of the room and drew the curtain closed behind them. When Del Floria had made sure no one was in sight, he activated one of the hidden levers know only to him.

The rear wall of the fitting room opened and Solo and Illya stepped through into the reception room on U.N.C.L.E. Square windowless, without doors of any kind, the room was furnished with a single desk, behind which a young blonde girl sat. In front of her was a panel of controls, none of which were labeled or otherwise identified and only she knew which button performed which purpose. As a measure of the rigid security of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, the controls were changed periodically.

The girl smiled in greeting as Solo and Illya entered. The smile widened when Solo winked at her. She gave them their triangular identity badges.

Badges affixed to their suits, they walked through the maze-like innards of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, their footsteps ringing on the steel floors. The badges they wore performed a definite purpose, for without them there would have been a triggering of the intricate U.N.C.L.E. alarm system and walls and doors would have closed, trapping them instantly. Twenty armed men would have surrounded them in a matter of seconds.

A swift and silent elevator took them up two floors. They turned left there, along another of the steel hallways. Doors opened as they approached, allowing them unhampered passage. When they reached the end of the

hallway, they stood before an unmarked steel door, seemingly no different than any of the other doors through which they had just passed.

But this particular door held a most special significance. Behind it was the office of the chief of U.N.C.L.E. operations in New York, the office from which policy was dictated, from which decisions effecting the nations of the world were reached, from which the wheels of the entire U.N.C.L.E. organization were set into motion.

It was the office of Alexander Waverly, one of only five men who formed Section 1—Policy and Operations. The door opened and Solo and Illya stepped inside.

Alexander Waverly was somewhat of a legend, and a mysterious one at that. It was said that he had spent some fifty years in British and American intelligence, but no one knew this for a fact and Waverly never offered any enlightenment. Though his accent was British his speech was punctuated with the inflections a man acquires when he has lived his life in many countries.

He was fond of rough tweeds and pipes. He had absolute recall of vital facts and information, but he had extreme difficulty in remembering the names of the men he saw every day.

Outwardly, he resembled a tired and elderly bookkeeper, eyes heavily wrinkled at the corners as if he had spent his entire life squinting at columns of figures in a ledger. His appearance belied the quick deadlines of his mind, the respect and obedience he neither commanded nor asked for, but which he unfailingly received.

It was impossible to tell by looking at him what went on behind those gray eyes, as Solo and Illya well knew. Waverly turned one of the sheets of paper before him face down and scratched his thinning, but neatly-combed gray hair absently.

"Bad news," he said without looking up "Umm, yes. Bad news indeed."

Napoleon Solo sneezed—twice.

Waverly looked up. "Are you catching a cold, Mr. Solo?"

Solo sniffed. Illya said with a faint smile, "The mountain air doesn't agree with him."

"Yes," Waverly said. "Quite so." He picked up a letter opener from his desk and scratched at the blackened bowl of his pipe. "I have just been reading the chemical reports of the sample you gentlemen sent along."

"Were they able to analyze it?" Solo asked.

"Analyze it?" Waverly said. "Yes certainly, Mr. Solo. Of course."

"What were its properties?"

"Why salt, Mr. Solo. I expect you know that already."

"Yes sir?" Solo said patiently. "But what I meant was, were they able to determine what was added to the water to cause the crystallization?"

"Not as yet," Waverly said. "No. All that has been learned to date is that the salt is genuine, not a synthetic composition with fresh water as its base."

Illya frowned. "Then there wasn't any trace of foreign substance in that chip of salt?"

"No, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said. "None at all."

"That is bad news," Solo said.

"Eh?" Waverly said.

"Bad news," Solo said, sniffing. "You were saying that just a moment ago."

"No, no, Mrs. Solo," Waverly said. "I was referring to something quite different."

He shuffled through the papers on his desk again, found several sheets bound together with a brad, and peered at the top page. He handed it across the desk to Solo.

"Section III's weekly report, gentlemen."

Section III—Communications and Research—was commanded by red-headed May Heatherly, a very pretty and capable young lady. Part of her job was to compile each week a report, gleaned from the heads on U.N.C.L.E. agencies throughout the world, on current THRUSH activity and movement. These reports were invaluable to Waverly and the other members of Section I in mapping out counter-offensives and strategy in U.N.C.L.E. ceaseless duel with the power-mad THRUSH Council and their quest for world domination.

Solo read through the report. When he had finished, he handed it to Illya, frowning. "Nothing," he said.

"Exactly, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "THRUSH activity is at a virtual standstill. I trust you realize the import of this?"

"Yes," Illya said. "The entire THRUSH operation has been mobilized into a single objective, a major offensive."

I daresay," Waverly said. "Each time THRUSH has become dormant, some sort of master scheme has been in the offing. I should think that this time will prove to be no different.

"Do you have any idea what they might be planning?"

"Not at the moment," Waverly said. "However, what you gentlemen witnessed in Oregon rather smacks of THRUSH work, wouldn't you say?"

"We had that though," Solo said.

"There have been other developments as well," Waverly said. "I expect you will be interested."

He stood and clamped his cold pipe between his teeth. He pressed a button on his desk, and then led them to the circular briefing table with the movable top at one end of the room. When they had seated themselves, a panel located on the wall slid back, to reveal a large screen.

The screen was operated by May Heatherly in Section 111. Presently, the gray screen lighted and an aerial film clip flashed in view. May Heatherly's voice came to them through the intercom network.

"this film was taken early this morning from an U.N.C.L.E. helicopter, three hours after we had received a report similar to the one from Oregon. It is a small lake in Northern Minnesota, in the foothills behind a resort community."

Illya and Solo and Waverly stared at the screen. Thick forest land surrounded the lake; the entire scene held a close resemblance to what Solo and Illya had seen in Kamewa. The film was in color, and the vivid green of the trees and the pale blue of the sky stood in bold contrast to the gleaming bleached whiteness of the lake itself. It lay silent and unmoving, like a pocket of fresh snow.

"Rock salt," Solo said softly.

"A team of U.N.C.L.E. agents attempted to reach the lake to investigate further" May Heatherly's voice said. "But a large rock slide had blocked the only road yesterday. They were forced to make a lengthy detour, and when they reached the lake this is what they found."

Another strip of film flashed onto the screen, this one having been shot from the sore of the lake. Placid blue water had replaced the glaring white of the aerial pictures.

Two succeeding bits of film were shown then, one of the tine dam in a Canadian province near Quebec, and the other of a lake in Alabama. Although both showed only blue water, May Heatherly explained that identical chemical changes had taken place in each. By the time U.N.C.L.E.

investigators arrived, there had been no traces of the transformation, but eye-witness accounts attested to the validity of the report.

In each of the four wide-spread cases, including Kamewa, the bodies of water had been small, isolated, and accessible only be a single road, which had been rendered impassable by land or rock slides a day or two earlier.

When the screen had gone dark, ending the commentary, Illya said, "What do you suppose all of this means?"

"A definite pattern, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said. "THRUSH is no doubt carrying out a series of tests. They have devised some type of chemical which is capable of converting pure water into hardened salt, as well as the antidote which reverses the process, and are testing its capacities. Preparatory to the major offensive we were speaking about, I should think."

Solo tugged at his ear. "This chemical THRUSH apparently has takes several hours to crystallize water, but the antidote reverses almost immediately. I shudder to think of what they might be planning to use it for."

"Indeed," Waverly said. "That is why we must find out what they are intending and take steps to prevent it immediately. That is, of course, yours and Mr. Kuryakin's job."

"I rather thought it would be," Illya said. "But where do we start?"

"Perhaps the message you found on the man in Oregon holds the answer to that," Waverly said.

"Has it been decoded yet?" Solo asked.

"I am expecting a report presently," Waverly said. "When it arrives, we shall know better how we stand."

The report arrived shortly before four o'clock U.N.C.L.E. cryptographers, highly-skilled in their field, had finally managed to break what was to them

a new and intricate THRUSH code. The message contained only two words, nothing more. But those two words were exactly the starting point Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin needed.

The message said: Teclaxican, Mexico.

A geographical map revealed that Teclaxican was a tiny Indian village several miles inland from the Western Coast of Mexico, in the state of Oaxaca. It also revealed that a lake in the mountains nearby served as the sole source of water for the village, and that there was but a single unpaved road leading up to it.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were aboard an U.N.C.L.E. jet bound for Mexico a little more than an hour later.

TWO

Napoleon Solo decided he had pneumonia.

He sat next to Illya Kuryakin on the rear seat of a battered and chilly gray sedan that rattled and bumped its way across a pitted back road in Southern Mexico. Outside a light drizzle fell on the flat countryside. Ahead of them, in the distance, were low foothills that blended into a mountain range, and the village of Teclaxican.

Solo sat hugging himself. He was miserable. The cold he had contracted in Oregon had grown progressively worse. His eyes were red-rimmed and his nose was running. Naturally, the heater in the sedan did not work. He was in foul humor.

They had arrived in the capital city of Oaxaca late the previous evening, too late for them to leave for Teclaxican. A Section V man from the U.N.C.L.E. office in Acapulco had driven down to meet them at the airport, and had arranged their accommodations for the night.

The driver of the sedan was a short Mexican named Diego Santiago y Vasquez, who sported a thick, brick-red mustache and had heavy wrinkled

jowls. He reminded Solo of a tanned walrus. He had informed them that morning when he had called for them at their hotel that he was the finest guide, the safest driver, ad the most dependable man to be found anywhere in Mexico.

During the hour they had been on the road now, he had kept up a constant chatter in passable English, extolling the virtues of the landscape through which they were passing, and accenting his dialogue liberally with anecdotes and obscure historical facts. Solo decided he would very much like to strangle the Section V man from Acapulco who had arranged for Diego Santiago y Vasquez to act as their guide.

"Off to your left, senors," Diego Santiago said from the front seat, "is the famous burial ground of the Zapotec Indian warriors, many of whom were slain by Aztecs who invaded their domain in the year—"

"Excuse my," Illya said, interrupting. "How much further is it to Teclaxican?"

"No more than ten miles now, senor," Diego Santiago said, and continued with his history of the invading Aztec hordes.

Illya sighed and looked across at Solo. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "How's your cold, Napoleon?" he asked innocently.

Solo glared at him.

"Have you been taking your pills?" Illya asked.

"Yes." Solo said with obvious effort. "I have taken my red and yellow pill, and I have taken my orange and black pill. Very soon now I am going to take my little pink pill."

Illya clucked his tongue patronizingly. Solo decided he would strangle him instead of the Section V man from Acapulco.

"In the foothills to the north senors," Diego Santiago y Vasquez was telling them "is a waterfall of such full-blown magnificence that your breath will catch in your throat at the very sight of it. You must be sure to take many colored pictures of it for it is rarely that—"

Solo cracked his head against the side window. The front wheel of the sedan had hit a chuck hole in the road, lurching violently, since Diego Santiago had taken his hands off of the wheel to punctuate his description of the waterfall with elaborate gestures.

Solo closed his eyes and wished blackly that some fine miracle would suddenly strike Diego Santiago y Vasquez most welcomingly mute.

THREE

They arrived in Teclaxican a half hour later.

The rain had stopped now, and there were patches of blue sky intermingled with the heavy black clouds overhead. It had already begun to warm noticeably, much to Napoleon Solo's pleasure.

Teclaxican itself was larger than they had expected it to be. It lay at the base of the foothills—several blocks of wooden buildings which included a sprawling, unornamented hotel, several cantinas and a high-steepled little church at the northern end.

The main street was unpaved, packed red adobe. Puddles of water from the rain dotted its expanse. In front of the church lay a grassy square where the street branched to circle back upon itself around the square.

They had passed through a small cluster of huts outside Teclaxican to the west, each having well-tended vegetable gardens and livestock pens. Diego Santiago y Vasquez explained that these were where the Zapotec Indians, indigenous to the region lived.

Off to their right, when they reached the outskirts of Teclaxican was an open market. Dark-skinned Indians hurried about, now that the rain had

ended, setting up long and heaping rows of green Mexican lemons the size of American oranges, green *zapotes* and black *chirimoyas*, onions, garlic, hemp rope and countless other articles.

They drove along the adobe street, crawling past thick groups of Indians and laden burrows, they stopped before the single hotel.

Solo and Illya got out gratefully. Solo stood in a patch of sunlight, wondering how long you had to spend in the hospital when you had pneumonia. Diego Santiago opened the trunk and began to unload their luggage and the cases of photographic equipment which was part of their cover there and which had been furnished by the Section V man from Acapulco. They were posing as a writer photographer team from *Travelogue* Magazine, in the area to do a series of pictorial articles.

When everything had been gathered, they went inside. A reservation had been made for them and the clerk at the desk, apparently highly impressed by the presence of such distinguished guests, informed them happily that they had been given the finest room in the hotel. A dwarf-sized Indian who oddly resembled a fiddler crab carried their luggage upstairs after they registered.

The finest room in the hotel turned out to be a two-room affair of dubious Spanish design on the third and top floor, complete with a fine view of two banana palms, above which could be seen the foothills in the distance. It contained several heavy, varnished wood pieces of mis-matched furniture, two unsafe-looking canopied beds and plumbing which was reminiscent of Queen Victoria's idea of the proper bath.

After they had unpacked, Solo debated going to bed to nurse his imagined pneumonia, decided against it for obvious reasons and took two cold capsules of U.N.C.L.E. manufacture instead. The capsules, he had been assured, were absolutely fool-proof. He did not believe it for a minute.

Illya Kuryakin ran water from the tap in the bathroom and tasted it, remembering not to drink any. All drinking water in this part of Mexico had

to be boiled first. The tap water tasted singularly bad, but there seemed to be no traces of salt.

"It seems THRUSH haven't begun their experiments here as yet," Illya said to Solo.

Solo nodded glumly. "We better look at the lake this afternoon."

"If the road hasn't been mysteriously blocked by some sort of slide," Illya said.

"The desk clerk would know," Solo said.

They went downstairs. The informed them that the road had indeed bee temporarily blocked by a heavy mud slide, two miles below the lake, apparently caused by the rains they had had in the area for the past few days.

It was curious that they should ask, he said. Illya Kuryakin quickly explained that they had heard conflicting reports of such a slide and since they were planning to photograph the lake they had wanted to confirm the reports.

I suggest we have something to eat," Illya said to Solo then. He smiled. "You would do well to feed that cold, you know."

Solo agreed, although he was not particularly hungry.

The hotel dining room was poorly lit, smelled of garlic and contained several wooden tables so flimsy-looking that they appeared to have been made of lacquered balsa wood. There was an open verandah at the upper end, affording a view of the flat plain and the foothills beyond it. Solo spied a table there, basking in warm sunlight and went directly to it.

A fat Mexican woman in a garish dress gave them a gap-toothed smile. "Senors?"

"Napoleon?" Illya said.

Solo shrugged, looking at the woman.

"I would suggest the *pozole*," the woman said, smiling. "It is the specialty, as you say."

"*Pozole*?"

"A very delicious dish," the woman said, "of pig's feet and hominy."

Solo's stomach quivered.

"If you don't mind," Illya said, "we'd rather have a steak. You do have steak, don't you?"

"*Sí*," the woman said, a little hurt that they did not wish to try the specialty. "Yes."

"Rare," Solo said. "Very rare, please."

The woman nodded. "You would like coffee?"

"Coffee would be fine," Illya said.

The woman moved away. They sat looking out toward the foothills as they waited. Up there lay the lake, perhaps a party of THRUSH scientists and agents and possibly the answer to what THRUSH was planing to do with the chemical they had developed. They would know more that afternoon.

The girl came out onto the verandah while they were waiting. Solo saw her first. He had been looking of to his right at the square, where a group of young boys carrying baskets laden with chewing gum and peanuts were trying to intimidate two elderly tourists, when he caught a glimpse of swirling color out of the corner of his eye. He swiveled slightly in his chair.

She was tall and slender, tiny-waisted and her carriage and figure suggested that of a professional model. She wore a brilliant red and yellow *enredo*—

wrap-around skirt—a white peasant blouse and braided sandals.

She walked to one of the tables where Solo and Illya sat. Solo watched appreciatively as she seated herself, smoothing the skirt. She had black hair, long and falling across her shoulders and in the sunlight slanting down on to the verandah, faint reddish highlights danced in its glossy sheen. Her eyes were a deeper black than her hair and very large and the light pink lipstick she wore contrasted well with her bronzed skin. She appeared to be Mexican, with perhaps traces of North American ancestry.

She caught Solo's admiring glance and lowered her eyes. Solo smiled. "Hello," he said.

The girl cocked her head, raising her eyes. A smile touched her mouth, widening and a soft musical laugh cam from her throat.

"Do you have a cold, senor?"

"Yes," Solo said sadly.

She laughed again. Solo said, "Won't you join us? It always depresses me to see people eating alone, especially very pretty young ladies."

"Well," the girl said hesitantly. Then, "Yes, all right. Thank you very much."

"Not at all," Solo said. Illya said nothing. He was used to Solo's ever-present, wandering eye for the ladies.

Solo stood, holding the chair for the girl as she sat down. He introduced himself and Illya. She told them her name was Estrellita Valdone and then said, "I do not believer I have seen you in Teclaxican before." She paused then. "I am sure that I would have remembered if I had."

"We arrived this morning," Solo said, pleased at the compliment.

"You are Americans, are you not?" Estrellita asked. "*Touristas*, no."

"Americans, yes," Solo said. "*Touristas*, no."

"What brings you to Teclaxican, may I ask?"

"An assignment," Solo said.

"Assignment?"

"*Travelogue* Magazine," Solo said. "We're doing a series of articles on the area."

"You are a writer?" Estrellita said, impressed.

"Not actually," Illya said. "What we're doing is a series of pictorial articles. I take the pictures and he writes the captions."

Solo scowled at him. The girl laughed. "It must be very interesting work," she said.

"Oh, yes," Illya said. "Very."

Solo said, "Do you live in Teclaxican, Estrellita?"

"No," she said. "I am from Mexico City. I have friends here and I come down quite often. You could not have chosen a more beautiful place to photograph."

The fat Indian woman appeared at their table again and Estrellita ordered something in Mexican. The woman moved away again. Estrellita said, "will you be in Teclaxican long?"

"About a week, more or less," Illya said.

"What will you be photographing, do you know as yet?"

"The Zapotec burial grounds, for one," Solo said, remembering Diego Santiago y Vasquez's oratory of that morning. "And we have heard of a waterfall in the mountains which appears promising."

Estrellita nodded. "When will you begin?"

"Tomorrow, probably," Illya said.

"Perhaps I cold accompany you," Estrellita said. "I know of many places which might be of interest to you."

"That could be arranged," Solo said. "On one condition, of course."

"And what is that, senor?"

"That you agree to have dinner with me tonight." Estrellita smiled. "I would like that very much."

The Indian woman returned momentarily with their steaks and a steaming plate of fresh shrimp, lemon and hot sauce. Estrellita explained that the shrimp were freshly caught and brought in daily from the coast. She offered Solo one, dipped in the hot sauce. He declined in deference to his wobbly stomach.

He set about eating his steak. He was surprised to find that it was very good and as a result was equally surprised to find that he was much more hungry than he had previously thought.

When they had finished eating they made small talk over strong but good Mexican coffee. Solo and Illya used the opportunity to test their cover story, mentioning places they had been and photographed.

They learned that Estrellita was indeed a model, showing summer clothing for one of the large Mexico City shops. She was between modeling assignments, now she said and relaxing with her friends for a week or two here in Teclaxican.

Presently, Illya decided that he had had enough banter and reminded Solo that they had several things to do preparatory to embarking on their assignment. Solo knew that Illya was anxious to have a look at the lake in the foothills behind Teclaxican and was in agreement that they best go down to the real work that had brought them there.

They bade goodbye to Estrellita, Solo eliciting her promise to meet him there for supper and returned to their room to change clothes. They wanted to see the lake without the instant travelogue of Diego Santiago, but they needed the use of his car and of his knowledge of the area to guide them. It appeared his company was a necessity, at least part of the way.

They changed into light khakis and Illya Kuryakin strapped on two of the camera cases for sake of appearance. It was possible that THRUSH had implanted some of its number in Teclaxican to act as scouts and they did not want to take any chances.

Solo felt much better now that he had eaten and he no longer had the chills which had been with him on the ride down from Oaxaca. Perhaps, he decided, the capsules the U.N.C.L.E. doctors had given him before he left New York were working after all. To be on the safe side, he would take another one before they left.

Someone in the hotel had brought up a pitcher of drinking water while they had been eating. It was in an earthenware carafe on the nightstand. Solo found a relatively clean glass in the bathroom and poured it full from the carafe. He popped one of the capsules in his mouth, tilted his head back and drank from the glass.

The pill stuck halfway down his throat. He coughed, spitting out the water. He choked the pill down and went into a series of rasping coughs.

"What's that matter?" Illya asked him.

Solo got his breath. "Try some of this," he said, handing Illya the glass.

Illya sipped some of the water. "Well," he said, "it looks as if our bird friends are hard at work again, testing or whatever it is they're doing."

The water in the glass carried the unmistakable taste of salt.

ACT II: DEATH LIVES HERE

They found Diego Santiago Y Vasquez in the El Pomo Cantina. He had, it appeared, been there since he left them when they checked into the hotel that morning. He had, it appeared, been drinking more than just a little of a potent Mexican cognac called *aguardiente*. He was most liberally drunk. He sat at a table against the rear wall of the cantina, with his chair tilted back precariously, arms folded across his chest. He was snoring loudly.

Solo shook him gently. Diego Santiago opened one bleary eye, closed it again, and then re-pried it open. He gave them a crooked smile.

"Ah, senor Solo," he said. "*Como esta*?"

"Not particularly well," Solo said. "You seem to be doing rather nicely though."

"We must have a drink," Diego Santiago said, reaching for the nearly empty bottle resting on the table top.

Napoleon Solo moved the bottle out of reach. "No more of that," he said. "We're going for a little ride."

"A ride, senor?"

"To the lake."

"The lake?" Diego Santiago said blankly.

"In the foothill," Solo said. "The lake, you know?"

"Oh, *sí*, *sí*," Diego Santiago said. "But the road, she is—"

"We know that," Illya said. "We're going as far as the slide."

"You wish me to drive you there?" Diego Santiago said, squinting at them.

"That was the general idea," Illya said.

"Senor," Diego Santiago said indignantly, drawing himself erect, "I do not drive when I am drinking. I am the safest driver—"

Looking at him, Solo decided that he was right. In Diego Santiago's condition, driving a car on a mountain road would be akin to suicide. "All right," he said. "If you'll give us the loan of your car and directions how to get there, well—"

"My car?" Diego Santiago said. Oh, no, I could not possibly, senor. My car, she is my living, my little child. I do not even allow my wife to drive my car."

Illya Kuryakin stepped forward. He took several bills from his pocket, holding them where Diego Santiago could see the denominations and began to leaf through them slowly. Diego Santiago wet his lips. He tugged at the corner of his mustache. He leaned forward His eyes grew bright.

When Illya Kuryakin had counted off a sufficient number of bills to suit their guide, Diego Santiago cleared his- throat. "Perhaps," he said, "if you were very careful, and were to promise to return by nightfall..."

"We'll be careful, all right," Illya said.

"Then," Diego Santiago said happily, "I consent." He snatched the bills from Illya's hand and tucked them safely away in his shirt pocket. He gave them his crooked smile.

Solo said, "We'll need directions." Diego Santiago explained how they could reach the lake from Teclaxican. Solo asked him if there were another road leading there other than the one that was asked if there were a trail of some sort that they could take on foot. Diego Santiago said there was, and told them where it was located. Satisfied, Napoleon Solo asked for the keys.

Diego Santiago produced them from his trousers. "Remember, senors," he said, "Be very careful. My car is my living, my little child..."

"Don't worry," Illya said. "We get along famously with children." Behind them, Diego Santiago called out to the bartender for another bottle of *aguardiente*. He was going to put his new-found wealth to good use.

TWO

They turned off the main road on to the one leading up to the mountain lake ten miles to the east of Teclaxican. The main road had led them in straight, perpendicular line to the base of the foothills, and then had veered sharply to the right to parallel them. The secondary road, on which they were now traveling, was little more than a narrow trail, allowing passage of but a single car.

Illya Kuryakin, driving, had been having more than a little difficulty with the sedan. The clutch slipped badly, and the steering was as tight as a diesel truck's. His arms ached from gripping the wheel. He observed dryly to Solo that Diego Santiago y Vasquez's little child had a typical female disposition.

Two miles into the secondary road they began to climb. The road began to wind, gradually at first, and then became a series of sharp turns as they moved upward. On their right were walls of shale and banks of light jungle; on their left a scant few yards off the road was a long, rocky slope that fell away into a valley below.

Illya held the sedan in low gear, hands white on the wheel, and they climbed at a bare crawl. "Nice road," Solo said, looking out at the shale bluff to his right.

Illya glanced cautiously into the open space of the drop and shuddered. "I keep thinking," he said, "how lucky we are Diego Santiago decided to get drunk."

Napoleon Solo grinned. "The slide should be up ahead about a mile," he said. "Do you think they'll have guards posted there?"

"Lookouts, probably," Solo said. "Hidden from sight."

"We'll have to go up to the lake through the jungle," Illya said. "Where did our friend Diego say that path was?"

"Just after the first turn before the slide." Solo said.

"They'll know we're coming."

"Can't be helped," Solo told him. "There's no other access to the lake. And we've got to have a look up there."

"I have the strangest feeling we're walking into something," Illya said.

Solo said nothing. He felt faintly' on edge, as well, a vague uneasiness.

They heard the jeep before they saw it. The sound came from behind them, the whine of an engine being geared down. Solo sat up on the seat, ears straining. "What's that?"

"Sounds like a jeep," Illya said, listening. "Behind us." Solo turned, looking out the rear window.

"I don't see anything." Illya hunched over the wheel, increasing his speed slightly. The road straightened as they came around a turn, dropping into a long dip and then rising steeply on the other side. They were climbing again when the jeep came into view around the turn.

"Jeep, all right," Solo said, still turned on the seat. "Three men. They're coming at a nice clip."

"Could be THRUSH agents, you know."

"Yes."

Illya, fighting the slipping clutch, pressed down on the gas. The sedan shot upward, cresting the rise in the road. Behind them, Solo saw the jeep, raising a cloud of dust, cross the dip and start up after them. The driver apparently knew the road well; his speed indicated that.

On the other side of the rise, the road turned sharply to the right. Illya braked heavily, twisting the wheel. The nose of the sedan pointed briefly towards the shale bank to the right, and then straightened.

The jeep came over the rise, slid into the turn, slowed momentarily, and then came on after them again. It was only a hundred yards behind, and gaining. Solo saw one of the men, the one net to the driver, stand up and rest something across the top of the open windshield, leaning forward. He knew instantly what it was.

"Machine gun!" he yelled. "Keep low!"

The quiet of the mountain road was split open with the roar of the machine gun. The rear window of the sedan shattered, and a bullet tore upward into the headliner, showering them with dust. Another bullet slammed into the seat back and buried itself there.

Illya, hunched over the wheel, threw the sedan into another turn, skidding, fighting for control. The sedan fishtailed, sliding sideways. Illya spun the wheel frantically. The nose, pointed out to the open drop to their left, reversed. The left rear wheel touched nothing but air, but the right caught the road bed, held, and the sedan straightened again.

Illya's heart was thumping wildly in his chest.

"We can't outrun them!" he yelled. "And there's no place to stop! We're trapped!"

"The slide!" Solo yelled back. "If we can get to it we've got a chance!"

The jeep negotiated the turn with no trouble. They were only fifty yards to the rear now, and still gaining. The chattering roar of the machine gun came again, and they heard bullets thunk heavily into the metal of the sedan. A deflected slug screamed past Illya's head, veering to the right, and spider-webbed the right hand side of the windshield.

Illya took the sedan into another curve, and when they came out of it, the road leveled into a long straight stretch. The drop to their left was not as steep now as it had been, but was grown with underbrush and dotted with rocks

A heavy wall of jungle grew down to the road on their right.

Illya peering ahead though the windshield, yelled, "The slide! Up ahead!"

The road was blocked at the far end of the stretch by a thick bank of mud and rocky earth that had been gouged from the jungle slope on the right. Kuryakin began to brake. Gear teeth snapped as he fought the gearshift into low. The sedan's engine protested wildly, but it began to slow.

"Right up to it!" Solo shouted. "Our only chance is to get into the jungle!"

The sedan was slowing rapidly, now. The man in the jeep cut loose with another burst from the ma chine gun. Another fifty yards...

The right rear tire on the sedan exploded.

The jarring impact of the burst tire, hit by one of the machine gun bullets, wrenched the wheel from Illya's grip. The sedan fishtailed again, violently, the back end slur ring to the right and the front end pointed directly at the open drop to the valley floor below.

Desperately, Illya clutched at the wheel, his foot crashing down on the brake, but even as he did so he knew that it was too late.

Solo had just enough time to yell, "look out!"

And then the sedan went off the road, front end lifting, and then crashing down heavily, and they began to slide downward, side ways, with Illya still hanging onto the wheel in a death grip, picking up speed as they crashed across. rocks and through the underbrush.

A large cluster of rocks lay in the path of their downward flight, and when the front bumper of the sedan crashed into the rocks, the rear end lifted, sending them airborne, catapulting the sedan end over end in a spinning, floating arc, like a toy tossed into the air by a child.

Further down, it hit the slope on its top, crushing it, and the sedan began to roll sideways, mutilated into a twisted pile of gray metal, and when it came to rest against a huge boulder a hundred yards from the valley floor below the gas tank exploded, sending huge tongues of flame and billows of black smoke high into the warm Mexican afternoon.

And then it was quiet again.

Three

Solo had been thrown clear. When the careening sedan had hit the first cluster of rocks, catapulting it into the air, the door on the passenger side of the vehicle had been jarred open and the impact had pushed him out.

He had landed in a clump of scrub brush, rolling, his head narrowly missing a large rock there. Dazed, he lay hidden from the road above in the brush and rocks, unable to move. The sound of the explosion below shocked his mind into instant awareness again.

He swiveled his head, looking down the slope. He saw the flames and the billowing smoke, and a numbness came over him. Illya, he thought. Illya's down there.

He started to rise. A sharp pain stabbed at his right leg. Looking at it, he saw that his trousers were torn. A huge gash had been ripped -in his leg from the fall. He lay still again, thinking, He's dead. Illya's dead.

A blind, white-hot rage came over him then. His head pounded. THRUSH was going to pay for this. He lay hidden, waiting. If the men in the jeep had seen him thrown clear, and came down to search... He felt for the U.N.C.L.E. special at his belt, but it was gone, lost in his rolling fall from the sedan.

He moved forward slowly on his stomach to where he could see around one of the rocks. He looked up at the road. He saw the jeep parked up there. The three men were standing at the edge of the slope, peering down. One of the men pointed. Solo saw another man grin, nodding his head. They were apparently satisfied. The three men turned and got back into the jeep.

Solo did not know any of the three, but he knew he would never forget their faces, even from this distance. The jeep moved up the road to the slide. The driver jockeyed, turning it around, and then stated back along the road, the way they had come. It disappeared around the turn.

Solo felt instantly in his pocket for his U.N.C.L.E. communicator. He had to contact Mr. Waverly, tell him what had happened. Waverly would send a team of U.N.C.L.E. agents out immediately. Solo knew there was nothing he could do by himself.

He located the communicator and brought it out. Damaged. The antenna had been snapped in the fall he had taken; there was no way he could fix it. He threw it down in disgust.

Now what? He had to get back to Teclaxican. But he did not know if THRUSH had anyone posted near the slide, though he decided they probably did have. He could not attempt to leave the area now for fear of being seen. If they knew he was still alive, and unarmed, he did not have a chance. There was only the one thing he could do.

He lay waiting for nightfall. Below him, the flames engulfing the sedan dwindled as the fire burned itself out. A thin waft of smoke curled into the sky, and then disappeared altogether. The charred, blackened lump of metal lay like a dark, ugly insect under the sun.

Solo looked away. He made his mind a blank. He did not want to think about Illya Kuryakin.

The sun began to fall into the west, maddeningly slow. Afternoon began to fade away to night. The shadows in the valley below deepened, and the air

began to take on a slight chill. Another hour, Solo thought as he lay behind the rocks. It would be dark in another hour.

He was acutely aware of the pain in his right leg. He had inspected it gingerly for broken bones. There were none. The gash was deep, and blood had flowed freely from it, but he did not think it would prevent him from walking. He had tied his handkerchief above the wound, tightly, to act as a tourniquet. It had stopped bleeding finally.

The sun was gone completely now, and the sky had turned from blue to muted black. A faint orange glow of twilight emanated from the west, fading, and then there was no light at all. The hour had passed.

He waited until the darkness was complete before moving.

He stood slowly, then, testing his leg. It seemed to be able to support his weight well enough. He started up the slope, keeping into the cover of the rocks there. The footing was treacherous in the dark, and he stumbled several times, almost falling.

He moved laterally instead of straight up, not wanting to get on to the road until he was out of sight of the slide and any lookouts that might be there. When he had worked his way around the turn at the western end of the straight stretch, he moved up to the road itself. He saw the path through the jungle to his left, the one Diego Santiago had told him led to the lake.

He debated going there for a look, decided against it since he was unarmed and since he did not know the area. When he got back to Teclaxican he would contact Mr. Waverly for the team of agents, and tomorrow they would come up here in force. Chances were that THRUSH thinking he too was dead, would not vacate the area before then.

He moved along the road, walking slowly, favoring his injured leg. He was careful to stay close to the slope on his right. If anyone came up the road, it seemed likely that they would be members of THRUSH, and he wanted to be able to get out of sight quickly. No one else would have reason to come up this road at night.

It took him over an hour to reach the main road. He had not seen any cars on the secondary road, nor did he see any now on the main one. It was ten miles back to Teclaxican, and he knew it was very possible that he would have to walk the entire distance. There was little chance of a car being out here on the plain at night.

The prospect was a grim one. His leg was aching badly now. He wondered if it would hold up for ten miles. But he had no alternative; he began to walk. He had gone approximately three miles, walking along the side of the road, when he saw the headlights.

They were coming toward him, from Teclaxican. He stopped. He did not know what to do. If he flagged the car down, and it turned out to be THRUSH-manned, he was a dead pigeon. He looked around him. Flat plain on both sides of the road, with no place to hide from the sweeping glare of the headlights. They were coming closer. He had no choice now. It was too late to run, and he knew he would not get far on his injured leg. Bending, he picked up a large, heavy rock and cupped it in his palm. It was little defense against a gun, he knew, but it was all he had. He stood waiting for the car.

It had been moving at a fast speed for the condition of the road, and it slowed suddenly, quickly. Solo knew that the driver had seen him, and had applied the brakes. He took a tighter grip on the rock, holding it at his side and slightly behind him in his right hand.

The car came to a stop almost next to him. A white face peered through the driver's window at him.

Solo stared. "Estrellita!" he said. Estrellita Valdone, black eyes wide, stared back.

"Mr. Solo! What...what are you doing here?"

"No time to explain now," Solo said quickly. "I've got to get back to Teclaxican. Will you take me?"

"Yes, certainly," she said. Solo went around to the passenger side of the car, a new Ford, and slid inside. He leaned back against the seat, stretching his injured leg straight out in front of him under the dash.

Estrellita was looking at him, eyes still wide. "You're hurt. What happened to you? I was worried when you did not keep our dinner engagement. No one seemed to know where you were."

"We had an accident," Solo said shortly.

"Where is Mr. Kuryakin?"

"He's dead," Solo said through clenched teeth.

"Oh! Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"Does Teclaxican have any policia?" Solo asked her.

"A subjefe," Estrellita said. "His name is Hernandez."

"Take me to him."

"But you should see a doctor. Your leg..."

"Later," Solo said. "The only person I want to see is the subjefe."

"All right." Estrellita swung the Ford into a U-turn, heading back toward Teclaxican. Solo sat staring out the windshield, not speaking. His face was grim, tightly set.

After a time he turned, looking at the girl beside him. "What were you doing out here this time of night?" he said.

"I could not sleep," Estrellita said. "I often go for a drive when I cannot sleep. I find that it relaxes me."

"It's a lucky thing you decided to come out here," Solo said. "I don't think I could have walked much further on this leg."

When they reached Teclaxican, Estrellita drove through it, turning to the right along a short street on the western edge. At the far end of the street, a low, balconied house lay behind a white-washed fence. A pair of twin banana palms grew in the yard.

Estrellita brought the Ford to a stop in front of the house. "The subjefe lives here," she said. Napoleon Solo nodded.

They got out and went through the gate in the fence. There was no time to lose, Solo thought. He would have to see the subjefe and then call Mr. Waverly in New York immediately on the spare communicator at the hotel. It would take time for him to get a team of agents here, and Solo knew that the longer they delayed the more likely the possibilities were that THRUSH would complete its testing in the area and pull out. He wanted to get back up to that lake as quickly as possible.

They walked up to the front porch. Solo rapped loudly on the door. There was only silence from inside. He rapped again. Still no answer. Solo turned to Estrellita Valdone.

She had been carrying a small, straw handbag, and it was open on her arm. She had taken something from inside.

Solo said, "What..."

She held a thin, silver vial in her hand, raising it up toward his face. Solo knew instantly what it was. He threw his right hand across his face, reaching out for her with his left. But he was too late. She released a button the side of the vial and a thin stream of odorless, almost invisible gas escaped from the end, enveloping Solo's head in a vaporous mist.

Nerve gas!

He had encountered it before. It had been developed, and perfected, by THRUSH, a favorite and deadly weapon they used mercilessly on whoever stood in their way. It attacked the nervous system, rendering the victim helpless within a matter of seconds. Any number of after-effects were

known to have occurred after contact with it...brain damage, palsy, respiratory malfunction.

Now, Solo stumbled backward as the gas poured into his lungs. He felt his mind beginning to cloud, a strange, disembodied feeling, and thoughts whirled together in a disjoined jumble. Estrellita, a THRUSH agent, should have known, should have been more careful, too friendly, asked too many questions, should have known, she must have been going to the lake tonight, story too pat, her house here no reality, too late,—can't contact, too late, too

Napoleon Solo collapsed, unconscious, to the wooden porch.

ACT III: THE RIM OF HELL

Illya Kuryakin thought he was dead. He lay in a sea of blackness, deep, impenetrable, and his first conscious thought was, So this is what it's like. It wasn't so bad, he decided. Just blackness. Nothing but a sea of blackness.

He smelled food. That was strange, a part of his mind said. You shouldn't be able to smell food if you were dead. He tried to identify the smell. Chili peppers.

Chili peppers?

He became aware that the blackness was not as deep as it had appeared at first. There seemed to be a light there, far away, almost a feeling of light, like you had when you were sleeping and someone turned on a dim lamp somewhere in the room.

Illya realized his eyes were closed. He tried to open them. The lids seemed stuck together. He concentrated on opening his eyes, and finally one parted into a slit. He was looking at a ceiling. It was rough-hewn, made of what seemed to be wood-braced adobe. He got the eye open all the way then.

He was in a single room, he saw, the walls of dark adobe like the ceiling. The light he had seen came from a small oil lantern on a wooden table at the far end There was a door there, closed. The smell of chili peppers seemed to come from the other side of the door.

He was lying on a straw mattress supported by a rough-wood frame. There was a thin blanket covering him to the waist. He saw that his chest was bare, and that he seemed to be wrapped in some kind of white cloth strips across his stomach and chest.

He tried to sit up then, and a sharp, biting pain stabbed through his right side, ripping a gasp from his throat, and he sank back down again. But the

shock of the sudden pain cleared his mind completely, and he was instantly alert.

Illya Kuryakin began to remember, then.

He remembered the hurtling, downward flight of the sedan as it left the mountain road with its blown tire. He remembered his futile efforts to slow it, and the pressure on his arms as he tried t manipulate the wheel. He remembered the jarring impact as the sedan crashed into the rocks on the slope, and then the floating, helpless feeling as they became airborne. He remembered the right door being wrenched open, and Solo being thrown out, and then his own frantic tearing at the door, his body leaving the sedan, spinning into the air.

He remembered rolling himself into a tight ball in midair, and automatic reaction, and then solid collision with the ground, and rolling, over and over, downward, and his desperate clawing at the rocky earth to stop his momentum, and then simultaneous knives of pain in his side and the back of his head. After that there was only blackness.

Illya felt himself sweating. Where was he? How had he gotten here? And what had happened to Napoleon Solo? Maybeъ

He heard the door at the far side of the room open. An old man came inside. Illya could see his face, wrinkled, leathery, in the flickering light from the lantern. He looked to be Indian.

The man came across the room cautiously, peering down at Illya. Seeing he was awake, the old man's lined face broke into a toothless grin. He said something in what Illya supposed was Zapotec dialect.

Illya shook his head slowly, indicating that he did not understand. The man nodded and left the room. But he returned seconds later with a young girl in her late teens. The girl went to stand above Illya. She smiled shyly.

"Can you speak English?" Illya asked her. His voice was thick.

"Yes, a little," the girl said, pronouncing each word carefully. "I have been to school to learn."

"Good," Illya said. "Now tell me, where are we?"

"The house of my father, Juan Corrazon," the girl said.

"Yes, but where? Teclaxican?"

The girl explained. Teclaxican was many miles to the west.

Illya said, "Are we near the lake?"

"Yes."

"How did I get here?"

"My father found you near the wreckage of an automobile," the girl said. "He was gathering firewood in the valley. He brought you here on the burro."

"When?"

"Tonight, after supper."

Illya could see through the single window in the room that it was dark outside. There was no sign of a moon. "What time is it?" he asked the girl.

"It is near midnight," she said. "We have been waiting for you to awaken."

Midnight. He had been unconscious for more than eight hours. He thought, What about Solo? He said to the girl, "Ask your father if he saw anyone else near the wreckage. Another man."

The girl spoke rapidly to her father. The old man shook his head emphatically. Illya wet his lips. Solo had been thrown clear he knew that. Suppose he was still up there on the slope, hurt, dying, or... He had to get to Teclaxican.

He tried to raise up again, and the biting pain in his side forced him down. His breath came in short gasps.

The girl stepped forward and put her hand gently on his shoulder. "You must lie still," she said. "You have broken ribs. I could feel them when I bandaged you."

"I've got to get to Teclaxican," Illya said through clenched teeth.

"In the morning I will go for the doctor," the girl said. "Tonight you must rest."

"You don't understand," Illya said. "I have a friend who was in that car with me when it went off the road. He's still on that slope somewhere. I've got to get help."

Again, Kuryakin tried to rise. The pain brought tears to his eyes. Groaning. he sank back.

The girl spoke to her father again. He shook his head. She seemed to be arguing with him. Finally, the old man gave a reluctant grunt and left the room.

The girl said, "I will take the burro to Teclaxican. I will bring the doctor back here."

"You'll go now?"

"Yes."

"All right," Illya said. "And bring the *policia* back with you."

"*Policia*?" the girl said. "subjefe Hernandez?"

"If that's his name," Illya said. He thought of something. "Where's my jacket?"

"On the chair," the girl said.

"Bring it here, will you?"

The girl brought him the jacket. Grimly he searched the pockets. His U.N.C.L.E. communicator was gone, undoubtedly lost on the slope. He threw the jacket down in frustration.

"I will go now," the girl said.

"Hurry," Illya Kuryakin said. "As fast as you can."

TWO

Subjefe Hernandez was one of the fattest men Illya Kuryakin had ever seen. He weighed in excess of three hundred pounds, and wore a soiled khaki uniform and a black-visored cap that was too small for his huge head. He was obviously not pleased at having been gotten out of bed in the middle of the night. He scowled down at Illya as the small, hawk-faced doctor probed with gentle fingers at his side. The girl had brought them from Teclaxican, arriving just a few moments before in a vintage station wagon belonging to the subjefe. She had been gone two hours.

"You will tell me again what happened," the subjefe said.

For the third time, Illya explained about the accident, about how they had been driven off the road by the jeep. The subjefe did not appear to believe him.

"Senor," he said, "I have had a very difficult day. This afternoon, my wife tells me she is to have another child. Tonight, something strange happens to the water in Teclaxican. And now, you have gotten me out of bed to..."

"What happened to the water?" Illya interrupted. But he already knew the answer.

"It begins to taste of salt," the subjefe said. "Our fresh mountain water. And then there is no more water. I turn on the faucet...nothing. I do not understand it."

Illya debated telling about the THRUSH tests, and decided against it. He could trust no one; somebody in Teclaxican had seen he and Solo leave that afternoon, and had sent the jeep after them. But he had to get to the hotel, to the spare communicator in one of the suitcases there. He said once again that his friend was lying somewhere on the slope, a victim of the accident.

"There is nothing we can do tonight, senor," the subjefe told him. "In the morning, we will send out a search party to look for your friend."

Illya gritted his teeth and kept quiet. It wasn't doing him any good, arguing.

The doctor finished his examination, announced that Illya had three cracked ribs and a mild concussion, and proceeded to tape him tightly. Illya thanked the old man and the girl for their help, and then he, the subjefe and the doctor got into the ancient station wagon for the ride back to Teclaxican.

After some argument, Illya Kuryakin convinced the doctor that he was well enough to spend the night unattended at the hotel, promising to stop for further examination in the morning. Alone in his room at last, Illya took the spare U.N.C.L.E. communicator from its hiding place in the false compartment under one of the suitcases and put through a Channel D call to Alexander Waverly in New York.

He was not surprised to find his superior still at headquarters. He explained what had happened in Teclaxican that day, and that he was worried about Solo's safety. Waverly told him that he would dispatch a team of agents to Teclaxican, and that Illya was to wait until they arrived before returning to the mountain lake. The chief of U.N.C.L.E. operations seemed greatly disturbed, and Illya sensed that not all of that perplexity stemmed from his report. But Waverly did not elaborate, and Illya knew better than to question him.

Late the following morning a distraught Subjefe Hernandez, his authority challenged by the arrival of the team of U.N.C.L.E. agents, led them up the winding road toward the lake. Illya, stiff, his side aching, his vision blurred from lack of sleep, sat grimly beside the subjefe in the lead jeep.

An irate and hungover Diego Santiago y Vasquez was there as well, having insisted that he be allowed to accompany them when he was told what had happened to his battered sedan.

They went first to the lake, along the path near the slide. Illya had wanted to search for Solo...he had not shown up in Teclaxican that night, and no one had seen nor heard from him-but he knew that if THRUSH were still in the area they had to be dealt with first.

But they found nothing at the lake. Illya had half-expected to see a gleaming crystallized floor of salt when they reached it, but there was only blue water, shining under the sun. It seemed THRUSH had pulled out its forces sometime during the night, either because they had finished their testing there or because they had somehow learned or were fearful of U.N.C.L.E.'s impending arrival. At any rate they were gone, and as had been the case at the other test sites, they had left no traces.

The men set about searching the slope where the sedan had hurtled downward the day before. Illya, tramping along the rocky, brush-covered ground, steeled himself for the discovery of Solo's body.

But they did not find his body. They found nothing, except for a small, bent object one of the men discovered near a group of rocks. Illya knew immediately that it was Solo's communicator.

He did not know what to think. Was Solo dead? If so, where was his body? Had THRUSH captured him? If so, where had they taken him? And what were they planning to do with him? Illya knew none of the answers. He knew only one thing for certain.

Napoleon Solo had vanished.

THREE

Alexander Waverly said, "I can readily understand your concern, Mr. Kuryakin. I must confess I am concerned as well. But THRUSH security is

the tightest we have ever encountered. There simply is nothing we have been able to learn about Mr. Solo's whereabouts."

Illya said nothing. It had been three days since his return from Mexico, and in those three days every U.N.C.L.E. office, every agent, had been placed on standby alert, every informant and source of information available to U.N.C.L.E. had been exhausted. No one, it seemed, knew or had found out anything concerning Napoleon Solo.

But there was another, even more important, reason for U.N.C.L.E. forces having been alerted and mobilized into readiness. There had been no more THRUSH tests.

Waverly and the other members of Section I knew that this could only mean one thing: THRUSH, apparently satisfied by their experimentation with the salt chemical, were on the verge of whatever major offensive their Council had set forth. And there was nothing U.N.C.L.E. could do except wait.

Their scientists, working feverishly, had learned nothing more from the sample of rock salt. The only new development had come from Section II, and that was the reason Waverly had called Illya to his office.

U.N.C.L.E. was now certain that they knew the name of the man who had developed the salt chemical.

Illya Kuryakin and Mr. Waverly were seated at the circular briefing table now. Illya, his injured side still bandaged heavily, sat uncomfortably on his chair, fidgeting. He had slept very little in the past three days, plagued with worry over Solo's safety. He had voiced those worries to Mr. Waverly just a moment ago. The waiting had begun to tell on his nerves; he wanted to do something, anything.

The screen on the wall before the briefing table flashed on to reveal a newspaper photograph, taken at a large gathering of some type. In the foreground were a group of three men, one of which had been looking toward the camera when the picture was snapped.

May Heatherly's voice came to them from Section III, somewhere inside the steel complex of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. "This picture was taken at the National Scientific Convention in Zurich seven years ago. The man looking at the camera is Dr. Mordecai Sagine."

Illya studied the man. He was short, squat, with a head that appeared much too large for his body, although that impression was not entirely an accurate one since he had a thick, leonine mane of light-colored hair that grew almost to his shoulders.

He looked, Illya thought, like an anachronistic rock-and-roll singer. The eyes, covered with heavy brows, were stark and penetrating, and his lower lip protruded a good inch below his upper lip. If he had a chin, it was not visible in the photograph. All in all, Illya decided, he had that type of face that frightened little children.

May Heatherly's voice said, "During the late nineteen fifties, Dr. Sagine received national prominence for his work in chemical analysis, most particularly in the early efforts to convert sea water into drinking water. He had been engaged in private research, with a government grant-in-aid. But in the early sixties he startled the scientific world with his announcement that he had discovered a reverse process, that is to say he had learned the secret of converting fresh water into salt water through the use of a catalytic chemical element.

"Even though he conducted several public experiments to prove his discovery, his colleagues ridiculed it as impractical and valueless. Some even went so far as to term the entire process an elaborate hoax.

"Dr. Sagine disappeared shortly thereafter, and since that time no one has seen nor heard from him. There was some speculation that, angered over the treatment he had received, he had defected, but this was never borne out. The photograph you see here is the only one U.N.C.L.E. has been able to obtain, and as far as we know the only one of Dr. Sagine in existence."

The photograph disappeared from the screen, and it went dark again. Illya looked at Mr. Waverly. "Sounds like just the type of disillusioned individual

THRUSH would entice into its fold."

"Exactly, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said. "Even though Dr. Sagine's original chemical process did nothing more than change fresh water to salt water, there has been an interim period of seven years to allow him to finalize it, hence producing crystallized salt from fresh water, and to develop an antidote."

"But we're still right where we started," Illya said. "We may know who he is, but we don't know where he is, and we don't know what THRUSH is planning to do with his discovery. We don't know what the chemical is and we don't know how to counteract it."

"We are faced with an extremely difficult situation," Waverly agreed. "Extremely difficult. But I am afraid the only position we can adopt at present is one of patient watchfulness."

"All we need is one little clue, something to go on," Illya said. He slammed his fist on the table in a rare display of anger and frustration.

"We have every department, every man, in constant vigil," Alexander Waverly said. "We shall uncover some pertinent development, Mr. Kuryakin. You may rest assured of that."

Illya's face was tightly set. "It had better be soon," he said, and added cryptically, "Before it's too late."

FOUR

The break they needed came much sooner than they had anticipated. And it came, not from the combined forces of U.N.C.L.E., but strangely enough from the Managing editor of *Travelogue* Magazine.

Two hours after Illya Kuryakin had been briefed on Dr. Sagine, a call came through the switchboard at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters for him. He had remained in Waverly's office, sitting silently in one of the chairs, the tenseness in his body mounting with each passing minute. The jangling of

the telephone on Waverly's desk jerked him upright on the chair, and he leaned forward as his superior answered it.

When Waverly told him the call was for him, Illya jumped from the chair, grabbing the receiver to his ear.

The man on the other end of the wire introduced himself as Robert Pausen, managing editor of *Travelogue* Magazine. He told Illya that he had just received a telephone call, asking for one of his photographers. The photographer's name, the caller had said, was Illya Kuryakin.

Illya frowned, not fully understanding at first. Then he remembered that, to insure their cover in Mexico, *Travelogue* Magazine had been informed of the guise and had agreed to cooperate fully if any queries were received by them. Now, Illya asked the managing editor who the caller had been.

"A woman," Pausen said. "A Miss Estrellita Valdone."

Estrellita Valdone? The woman they had met at the hotel in Teclaxican. Illya scowled. What reason could she possibly have for contacting him? Unless- He asked, "Did she say why she had called?"

"No," Pausen said. "Just that it was urgent she speak with you."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I would try to locate you."

"Did she leave a number?"

"Yes," the managing editor said. He gave it.

Illya wrote it down on a scratch pad, thanked Pausen, and hung up. He stood tugging at his ear thoughtfully, aware that Waverly was looking at him. He explained the nature of the call quickly.

Waverly tapped the dottle from his pipe. "You should call the woman immediately," he said. "It may be that she has something to tell us about the

events in Teclaxican."

Illya Kuryakin nodded. He picked up the phone, contacted one of the U.N.C.L.E. operators, and gave her the number. He waited, drumming his fingers on the desk top.

When the phone was answered on the other end, Illya recognized the voice as that of Estrellita Valdone. He explained that his editor had contacted him, and that he was returning her call.

Illya stood listening, nodding silently as Estrellita spoke. He scribbled on the scratch pad. A moment later, he hung up the phone and turned to Waverly,

"Well, Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly said.

"Just what we've been waiting for," Illya said, excitement in his voice. "She wants me to meet her at nine o'clock tonight."

"Yes!" Waverly said. "And why does she want to meet with you?"

"She says she knows where Napoleon is."

FIVE

Napoleon Solo did not know where he was. When he regained consciousness, he was lying on a cot in a small room with no doors and no windows. The walls of the room were painted green, a pale pastel shade of green. There was nothing in the room except the cot.

At first his mind refused to function. Thoughts became separate entities, apart from each other. A single thought would touch his mind, and then fade, to be replaced by another. He tried to concentrate on each thought, fuse it with a second, achieve some continuity. But it was as if he were dreaming, a deep, troubled dream, from which he sought desperately hard to escape, to wake from, and could not.

He was aware, separately, of his surroundings. First the walls. And then the color of the walls. The ceiling. The cot on which he was lying. The fact that the room had no doors or windows. Each of these facts touched his mind, fled, returned again, one by one, intermingling with other facts, other thoughts, but never two in the same sequence.

He fought the silent battle within his mind for an interminable period. There was no time for him; there was only the mental conflict, the intense pressure exerted on every cell in his brain that stretched dangerously taut the fine line between rationality and insanity.

His body was rigid, immobile, on the cot, and he stared at the ceiling above and knew nothing of the silent, waiting eyes hidden behind one-way view-plates in the walls, watching the struggle that went on within him.

Reason returned to his mind with infinite, but inexorable, slowness. Finally he was able to grasp one of the ephemeral thoughts, hold it, and it remained, stark and vivid. The walls were green. It was very odd, the thought said, that the walls should be green. Four green walls.

Where was the door? There should be a door in one of the four green walls.

He felt the fusion of those two images, and then, slowly, there was the related knowledge of the cot on which he lay, and of the fact that his entire body was soaked in hot, flowing perspiration. He was aware, in that moment, of the lessening of pressure on his brain, and he felt his body relax, lose its rigidity. A sense of great relief, like a purge flooded through him, to be followed almost immediately by a heavy drowsiness that seized the lids of his eyes and pulled them closed.

He had won the battle, and now he slept. When he awoke again, there was full clarity.

He was instantly aware of his surroundings, and even though his head pounded with an intenseness he had seldom experienced, he was able to recall everything that had happened before he had been exposed to the

nerve gas. He had only vague recollection of its effects on his mind; it was as if he had just wakened from a nightmare.

He lay looking around him. A cell, he thought. That would explain the absence of a door and of windows. Entrance was probably gained through an electronically operated panel in one of the walls. Yes, a cell. But where? Mexico? Or where else?

That didn't seem likely. THRUSH had been there merely for the purpose of conducting tests. Then—THRUSH'S base of operations. Of course. They had to have a secret, well-hidden complex, one unknown and unsuspected by U.N.C.L.E. a place where the salt chemical could be developed.

But where?

Solo lay motionless on the cot. Why had he been brought here, wherever he was? A wedge, he thought. Yes, that must be it. An added bit of precaution by THRUSH, in case they needed bargaining power for negotiations with U.N.C.L.E. And such negotiations, Solo knew, would only come about if THRUSH gained the upper hand in the battle between the two powerful forces. Consequently, the obvious assumption was that THRUSH was on the verge of launching whatever insidious plot its council had devised.

But what that was, he still had no way of knowing. And locked in this doorless, windowless cell, there was nothing he could do to stop it. Escape seemed impossible. But there had to be a way. And he had to be ready, not lying helpless on the cot. Solo gritted his teeth and swung his legs out and down to the floor, pushing himself into a sitting position with his hands. He sat for a full minute.

He tried to stand. His legs would not support his weight and he fell. His body felt drained, fever-weak, and every fiber of his being ached. Nerve ends like open sores set him trembling.

He spent almost an hour learning to walk again. It was almost as if he were a child, a baby taking his first experimental steps. He managed, with great effort, to stand finally, after falling several times.

Equilibrium returned as slowly as had his ability for rational thought. But, irrevocably, it did return. He took a step on his right foot, swayed, arms flailing, and this time he did not fall. Elation rushed through him. He took another step, with his left foot and fell again. But now the sense of defeat had left him, and he got up immediately.

He walked. He walked from front to back of the green-walled room, from side to side. Some of the weakness had begun to leave him. He flexed his arms, his fingers, working his muscles. He held his hands in front of his eyes and willed them to stop shaking.

He had to keep moving. If he gave in to the raw jangling of his tortured nerves, his mind could still snap. He forced blankness of his brain, continuing to walk. A whirring sound came from behind him. His heart began to pound wildly and he spun around, crouching catlike.

A small, square opening had appeared in the flat surface of the floor near the cot. Solo closed his eyes, clenching his fists, concentrating every ounce of his will on quieting the raging forces in his body. When he felt calm returning, he opened his eyes.

The opening was gone. But on the floor where it had been was a small bowl, wooden, containing some kind of greenish liquid.

Solo went there and bent, looking at the bowl. He was ravenously hungry. He did not know how long he had been without food. He wet his lips and lifted the bowl to his mouth.

Warning lights touched his brain. Drugs, he thought. It might be loaded with drugs. Maybe they think I know something, and they put some kind of narcotic in here, like a truth serum.

Solo flung the bowl from him, across the room, and it hit the concrete floor with a dull thud, spattering the greenish liquid on the green walls.

* * *

Solo had lost all track of time. At first, he refused to sleep. He paced the room continually, stopping only to rest for short periods. His nerves had begun to function normally, as had the remainder of his body. But he was afraid to close his eyes, afraid enough of the gas remained in his system to have harmful effects while he slept.

Finally, the fatigue became too great, and he knew it was impossible for him to remain awake. He lay down on the cot, and sleep covered him like a blanket the instant he shut his eyes. When he awoke, the surging pain in his head was gone. He felt stiff, but otherwise the adverse bodily conditions had disappeared completely. He was greatly relieved. The danger point had been passed, now.

There was another bowl of the greenish liquid on the floor, but he ignored it, feeling the pangs of hunger in his stomach. He lay on the cot for a while, thinking about Illya and, bitterly, about the girl named Estrellita Valdone. Then he stood and began pacing. There was still the possibility, he knew, of claustrophobia setting in, and of morose melancholia. He had to keep busy, keep doing something, keep his mind from dwelling on his imprisonment.

He walked. He thought, though for short periods. He exercised his body. He slept, fitfully, for an hour or two. And he fought the growing hunger in his stomach each time a fresh bowl of the greenish liquid came up through the opening in the floor.

He had been in that single room for three days, though he had no idea it had been that long, when the two men came for him. He was sitting on the cot, resting his legs after walking, when a loud whirring sound came from one of the walls on his right. The sound did not frighten him, as had the one that first day. He looked up.

The wall had slid open. Outside was a hallway. Two men stood there, each armed with a sub-machine gun and an Army-type automatic at their belts. They were dressed in brown khaki uniforms and black-billed caps. Solo recognized their attire as that worn by THRUSH guards.

One of the men made a motion with the gun he held in his hands. Solo stood, wetting his lips. They were taking him out of here. Now, he thought, maybe I'll find out where I am. Maybe I'll find out what T.H.R.U.S.H....

A sudden thought struck him, What if it were too late? What if THRUSH had already launched their offensive? And what if it had succeeded? What if... He forced the questions out of his mind. He couldn't afford to think like that. It wasn't too late. It couldn't be. There was still time. There had to be.

Solo went out into the hallway. One of the guards prodded him to the left, and they walked in that direction. The guards flanked him. At the end of the hallway was a blank wall that opened to reveal an elevator as they neared.

They moved inside. Machinery buzzed, and the panel slid shut. They began to rise. Napoleon Solo had the odd feeling that he was in U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, ascending to see Mr. Waverly; the electronic panels, the concrete and steel construction, was very similar. There was no doubt about it, Solo thought. This was a major THRUSH fortress.

The elevator stopped abruptly. The panel slid back, and they stepped out. Solo was not prepared for what he saw. It was a laboratory.

Not a laboratory by any normal standards, however, it was huge, the size of an auditorium, high-ceilinged. Banks of equipment, huge caldrons, like wine vats, long rows of benches laden with jars, bottles, test tubes and other chemical paraphernalia covered every available inch of space. Overhead, a maze of intricately spiraling glass tubing linked the vats with each other and with various oddly-shaped machines...each with a series of dials, gauges, and round glass bowls at the base...scattered throughout the room. A colorless liquid bubbled, apparently under great heat, inside the tubing and the glass bowls under the machines. To his right, Napoleon Solo saw a large, straight piece of tubing, much larger than the ones overhead, that led from the largest of the vats to a conveyor belt of sorts. It was circular, revolving slowly.

Three men stood grouped around it, and Solo could see that they were filling five gallon jars through a tap in the tubing. One man operated the

tap, and when each jar had been filled with the colorless liquid one of the other men would take it from the revolving belt and put it onto another, short conveyor that disappeared through an opening behind him. The third man replaced the full jars with empty ones.

This was not only a laboratory, Solo realized; it was a manufacturing plant. The colorless liquid, he guessed. was the chemical which was capable of converting fresh water into crystallized salt. But why were they producing such great quantities of it?

One of the guards prodded Solo again, and they began to walk across the room, threading their way through the equipment. They passed men in white laboratory smocks, hunched over the benches, checking gauges, scurrying about in an appearance of general disorder. Like they were pressed for time, Solo thought. Like they were trying to meet a deadline. A chill touched his neck. There was only one reason why they would be moving at such pace.

The room was alive in a cacophony of sound...the liquid bubbling overhead and in the vats, the whirring of machinery, voices raised in an effort to be heard. Solo's head began to ache again; after the time he had spent in the total silence of the single room, the sudden exposure to such din was almost deafening.

They reached the far end of the room. There was a wide, Plexiglas window there, affording a view into another, much smaller laboratory. It was almost a miniature, scale model of the one in which they stood, replete with everything except the vats, the conveyor belts, and the oddly shaped machines.

Private lab, Solo thought. And inside there had to be the man who was behind all this, the head of the THRUSH project, the developer of the salt chemical. One of the guards opened a door set beside the Plexiglas window, and they stepped inside.

The private lab was soundproofed. As soon as the door was shut, the outside noises ceased. There was only the gentle bubbling of liquid in the

spiraling tubing that connected two small glass jars at one end.

A man sat on a high stool before a group of test tubes on the long, single bench that covered the length of the room. He was writing furiously on a piece of yellow paper. He seemed not to have heard them enter. "Dr. Sagine?" one of the guards said.

The man made no response.

"Dr. Sagine?" the guard said, louder this time.

The man looked up irritably. "Yes, yes, what is it? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"You asked us to bring him down," the guard said, pushing Napoleon Solo forward with his free hand.

"Well, all right. You've brought him," the man said. "Wait outside."

"Hadn't we better..."

"Wait outside, I told you!"

"Yes, sir."

The two guards left the room.

Solo stood looking at the man on the high stool. He felt a faint revulsion.

The man was the ugliest individual he had ever seen. He was chinless, with a wetly protruding lower lip. He was very short, almost gnome-like, with a huge head and a bushy mop of shoulder length, jaundice-colored hair. His skin was pale, an unhealthy white color, and bushy yellow brows topped bright, gray eyes that reminded Solo of rodent's.

Sagine was bent over the yellow piece of paper once again. Solo waited. The man finished his writing, swiveled on the stool, and broke the pencil he had been using in half. He threw the two pieces over his shoulder, staring at Solo.

"MR. U.N.C.L.E. agent, is it?" the man said. "Got you, didn't we? Nerve gas. Breaks most men down. You're a strong one, you are, but we'll break you. Watched you in the cell, you know. Watched you the whole time in there. View plates in the walls. Thought you were going to drink the soup. Did you guess it was drugged? Of course you did. You're a smart man, MR: U.N.C.L.E. agent, but we'll break you. Oh yes, we'll break you."

Solo stared at the man. He was obviously quite mad. The short staccato speech had been clipped off in a reedy, high-pitched voice. If the man spoke that way, then he must think in the same manner, a thousand confused, whirling thoughts spinning in his mind. Solo shuddered involuntarily, remembering how his own thoughts had spun, how close he had come to madness himself.

Yes, this man was mad, all right. But he was also very dangerous. Solo would not make the mistake of underrating him.

He said, "Just who are you?"

"Who am I? Who am I? Dr. Sagine, that's who. Dr. Mordecai Sagine. The finest chemist in the world. They laughed at me; did you know that? I showed them. Oh, yes, I showed them. They won't laugh now, you know. I developed the Sagine formula. I did it. Took me ten years."

Solo tried to extract some logical sense from the man's diatribe. He had never heard of Dr. Mordecai Sagine, but the man doubtless was the inventor of the chemical. And as such, he would know what THRUSH was planning to do with it. All else was unimportant now.

Solo said, "I must admit, it took a brilliant mind to perfect such a process as you have here."

"You agree, do you?" Dr. Sagine said. "You're intelligent, MR. U.N.C.L.E. agent. The rest of them weren't. Fools, all of them."

"There must be a great number of uses you can put your discovery to," Solo said.

"Uses, eh? Only one use, MR. U.N.C.L.E. agent. The ultimate use. My name will be legend, did you know that? I will be immortalized. THRUSH has promised me. Oh, yes. Dr. Mordecai Sagine."

"What use will your chemical be put to, Dr. Sagine?" Solo asked softly. A crafty look crept into Dr. Sagine's fevered eyes. "Trying to get information out of me, are you? Well, no matter. Nothing you can do about it. We'll break you like a stick, Mr. U.N.C.L.E. agent."

Dr. Sagine hopped down off the stool and walked in a shuffling, crab-like step to where a door stood at the far end of the private lab. Solo followed him. Dr. Sagine opened the door, stepped through, turned to see if Napoleon Solo was behind him, and then went to a desk in the middle of the adjoining room and sat down in a chair behind it, folding his arms across his chest.

"Well?" he said. Solo frowned. "Your office."

"Look there," Dr. Sagine said, pointing to what appeared to be a blank wall. Then he pressed a button somewhere beneath the desk. The wall slid back, revealing a Plexiglas window much like the one in the laboratory.

The first thing Solo saw was blue sky. Blue sky, dotted with gently rolling clouds. In the distance, he could see snow-capped mountain peaks. He went to the window quickly, looking out.

Below him, and to the side, he saw sheer walls of granite. This fortress is hollowed out of solid rock, he thought. Near the top of a mountain. Below him was a precipitous drop of what he guessed must be in excess of a thousand feet. A canyon lay down there, and there was the tiny, winding line of a river that flowed through it. To his left, where the walls of granite curved, receding, he could see the edges of a road that had been carved in the mountainside.

"Well?" Dr. Sagine said. "What do you see, MR. U.N.C.L.E. agent?

Solo said nothing. The snow-capped mountains in the distance reminded him of something. He had seen them before. Where...

"Do you see the river down there?" Dr. Sagine said. "Do you?"

"I see it," Solo said. He was trying to remember.

"Do you know what river that is?" Dr. Sagine asked him.

Solo got it then. Pike's Peak. He and Illya had been to Denver once on an assignment, and they had... The river! Of course, there was only one it could be.

"The Colorado River!" Napoleon Solo said.

"Yes, yes, the Colorado," Dr. Sagine said. "Quite correct." He laughed maniacally. "Four hours to go. Exactly four hours. Going to put the Sagine formula in that Colorado River down there, you know. Going to turn that river into a frozen bed of rock salt. What do you think of that, MR. U.N.C.L.E. agent?"

Solo spun it round. The Colorado River, the most important river in the Western United States. If it were crystallized, thousands of fertile acres of agricultural land in Arizona, Utah, Nevada and California that depended on water from the Colorado for irrigation would be reduced to barren wasteland. Electrical power derived from the huge dynamos at Hoover Dam would cease. Hundreds of thousands of people would be without drinking water.

"Only the first step, you know," Dr. Sagine said. "THRUSH wants a major test. After that, the formula goes into every main body of fresh water in the world. Simultaneously. Oh, yes, the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River, the Nile, The Amazon, the Congo, the Huang. All of them. In the mountains, too. Melting snow. All the fresh water reduced to rock salt. Millions of people at my mercy. I'm the only one who knows the antidote. The only one."

Spittle flecked Dr. Sagine's deformed lower lip. Solo stared at him, speechless. "Two days," Dr. Sagine said, his mad eyes alive with the fever of his affliction. "Two days to immortality! I'll have my revenge then. Oh.

yes, they'll be sorry they laughed at me. THRUSH will see to that. Going to force the world powers to surrender under their terms. Extinction by thirst and famine if they don't. Tidal floods, too. I can do that. Just put in too much of the antidote. Food everything. Two days, Mr. U.N.C.L.E. agent. Two days, and THRUSH and I will rule the world!"

ACT IV: NO ESCAPE

The address Estrellita Valdone had given Illya Kuryakin was a rundown warehouse along the East River.

At nine o'clock, he stood on the deserted street in front of the warehouse. An ice-like, numbing wind blew in across the river, touching his face with chill fingers. It was very dark...there were no street lights...and the silence was deep except for the mournful howl of the wind.

An alleyway ran alongside of the warehouse to the left, a pit of blackness. The rear entrance, Estrellita had told him. Down the alleyway, up on to the pier.

She had sounded frightened on the phone. She had information about Napoleon Solo, and had come to New York to find Illya. But there had been two men on the plane, and they had followed her. A cousin of hers owned the warehouse, she said, and she was staying in a small room he had there. She had eluded the two men, but she was afraid to leave the warehouse for fear they would find her. He must come alone, she had said; he must trust no one. And he must make sure he was not followed.

A nice story, Illya Kuryakin thought as he stood on the dark street. He had passed over it at first, elated over the news that he might soon find out what had happened to Solo and where his friend was. But in the taxi ride over, he had begun to dwell on Estrellita's story, and had found holes in it you could drive the proverbial truck through.

Why had she come to New York at all? Why hadn't she simply gone to authorities in Mexico? And if there were some other reason then why hadn't she gone to the authorities here?-Why call him? He was supposed to be a mere photographer. What could she expect him to do that the police could not?

He had a strong feeling of uneasiness. There were things that disturbed him about Estrellita Valdone. She hadn't put in an appearance in Teclaxican the morning after their accident. She and Solo had had a dinner engagement; yet, when Solo had not shown up for it, she had not asked any questions of the hotel clerk as to his whereabouts. Illya had questioned the clerk and knew this for a fact.

Of course, it was possible that she had seen something that afternoon, after the accident, that had sent her into hiding. It could have been then she learned whatever it was she had to tell Illya. But he had thought of arguments against this; if she knew of Solo's whereabouts, then she must have seen him being taken somewhere. And if she had learned this the afternoon of the accident, then that would logically mean that Solo were still somewhere in Mexico. That being the case, Illya was right back to his original query. Why had she come to New York?

He was beginning, as they say, to smell a rat. Or, more correctly, a—THRUSH.

He debated his next move. He could go back to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, report his suspicions, and lead a raiding party back to the warehouse. But if he did that, there was the possibility that Estrellita would be gone when he returned. And that would leave them where they had started. In a blind alley.

Too, there was the chance that they had seen him arrive. They might be watching him now, hidden in the shadows. If he tried to leave they could stop him without any trouble. A well-placed bullet in the darkness, and you could scratch one U.N.C.L.E. operative.

He knew he had to go through with the meeting. He had to take the risk. U.N.C.L.E. was powerless now; they knew nothing of THRUSH's cabal. Inside that warehouse, one way or another, lay the answers to a lot of questions.

Illya Kuryakin entered the mouth of the alley. The blackness was absolute. He walked carefully, feeling his way along the side of the warehouse. He

had gone no more than a few steps when he heard something. He stopped, listening. Quiet, and the howl of the wind. He took another step, his hand on the U.N.C.L.E. special at his side.

There was a scurrying sound directly in front of him, and a shapeless black form darted past him, brushing his leg. He eased the pressure of his hand on the gun. Cat, he thought. But his body did not relax.

He reached the end of the alley and stepped up onto a catwalk at the edge of the pier. Below, the black waters of the river churned at the pilings. The sting of the wind was more pronounced here, tugging at his clothing, chilling him. He walked carefully. One good, strong gust of that wind could send him plunging into the icy river. He would not last five minutes in the subzero waters.

He stepped up on to the pier itself, and went along it to where he found the door Estrellita had said would be there. He lifted his U.N.C.L.E. special from its holster, flicked off the safety, and thrust his right hand and the gun into the pocket of his overcoat. He rapped loudly on the door.

It was opened almost immediately. The white face of Estrellita Valdone peered around the jamb.

"Mr. Kuryakin?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"I'm alone."

She swung the door wider. He stepped past her, inside. A light glowed dimly at the far end of the warehouse. Estrellita shut the door, motioning for him to follow her, and they threaded their way through heaping rows of empty pallets, packing crates, and misshapen, canvas covered mounds, toward the light.

As Illya Kuryakin approached, he saw that the light came from an office. A glass partition allowed him to see that it was empty, containing only a single, cluttered desk and a row of metal filing cabinets.

Estrellita entered the office, and then turned, facing him. Illya stood in the doorway. "All right," he said. "Now tell me where Napoleon is."

He did not hear the man come up behind him. He did not even know the man was there until he felt the hard thrust of metal in the small of his back, and the rough hand that jerked his arm from the pocket of his overcoat and tore the U.N.C.L.E. special from his fingers.

He stood motionless, feeling the pressure in his back, pressure that could only come from a gun muzzle, and cursed himself for not being more careful. He should have checked the warehouse. He should have

Estrellita Valdone, clad in a khaki shirt and men's trousers, was smiling coldly at him. "I am going to do better than tell you where your friend is," she said. "I am going to take you there. I think, perhaps, we can arrange for the two of you to share the same cell. An U.N.C.L.E. reunion, as it were. How does that strike you, Mr. Kuryakin?" Illya said nothing. He was staring at the Army-issue, .45 automatic that was clenched, black and deadly, in one of Estrellita Valdone's small, white hands.

TWO

I've GOT to get out of here, Napoleon Solo thought.

I've got to get out of here and warn U.N.C.L.E. what THRUSH and this madman are planning to do. They've go to be stopped, no matter what the cost.

It was a fantastic plot. But it would work, Solo knew. If THRUSH succeeded, the world would indeed be at their mercy. They could wreak havoc, destruction. Panic would result, and nations would crumble into chaotic ruin. If THRUSH gained control... He had to get out of there. But

how? Solo looked at Dr. Sagine. I could grab him, he thought. Use him as a hostage.

No, that was no good. Dr. Sagine, even though he probably did not know it, was now expendable. He had perfected his chemical. THRUSH no longer needed him, no matter what they had promised. Once the crystallization had taken place world-wide, they would undoubtedly reward him with a bullet in the back of the head. Dr. Sagine might think he was the only one who knew the chemical antidote, but THRUSH scientists, working in close proximity with him, would have undoubtedly learned the secret by now. No, using Dr. Sagine as a hostage wouldn't work at all.

Solo had to think of another way. And it couldn't be here, not in this office or in the laboratory outside. It had to be...

He had an idea. It was a slim chance, a very slim chance. If he failed, there would be no second opportunity.

He said, "You're insane, you old buzzard."

Dr. Sagine jumped up from his chair. "What?" He said.

"That's what I said," Solo told him. "A psychotic old buzzard with delusions of grandeur."

A sound like the enraged squawk of a bird came from Dr. Sagine's throat. He brushed past Solo, into his private laboratory, and threw open the outer door.

"Guards!" He yelled. "Take this man back to his cell! Lock him in! We'll break him and reduce him to a quivering mass of jelly! Nobody talks to Dr. Sagine like that!"

The two guards rushed inside, grabbing Napoleon Solo. They hustled him out into the main laboratory. Solo could still hear the mad doctor screaming hysterically, even above the clamor.

Roughly, the guards prodded Solo across the laboratory to the elevator. The electronic panel slid back, and they stepped inside, one guard on either side of Solo. The panel closed again, and they began to descend.

Solo had accomplished what he had set out to do by infuriating Dr. Sagine. He needed to get out of the office and out of the laboratory as quickly as possible, to get into the elevator alone with the two guards. This was his chance. He allowed his body to relax, arms hanging loosely at his sides. One more second, now. One more...

The elevator stopped. The panel began to slide back.

Solo dropped to one knee. It was a single, fluid motion, catching the two guards completely by surprise. They reacted just as Napoleon Solo had hoped they would. They both turned toward him, leaning forward.

As soon as his right knee touched the floor of the elevator, Solo pushed upward with his left foot, hands clenched into fists, touching one another at his chest, elbows extended to the sides.

He had come up into a crouch, body still moving upward, when he drove both elbows out, simultaneously, in piston-like quickness It had been perfectly timed. Both elbows ripped with pile-driving force into the respective stomachs of the two guards, bending them over at the waist. Twin explosions of gasping pain escaped from their throats.

Solo, standing once again as the two guards went double, lifted both hands and brought the hard edge of each hammering down karate style He felt a satisfying shock shoot up each arm as his hands connected solidly with the back of each guard's neck. They dropped without a sound.

The elevator panel stood wide open, revealing the long, empty hallway. Solo, bending quickly now that the first part of his gamble had worked, took the automatic strapped to one of the guard's waist and shoved it into the belt of his trousers, ignoring the machine guns because of their bulk. Then he grabbed each of the guards by the back of the shirt and dragged

them out of the elevator, depositing them in the hallway. He stepped back inside.

He had noticed that there had been two small buttons, barely visible, on one of the walls of the elevator when he had been taken up to the laboratory. It was with those buttons that his chance for escape lay.

They had undoubtedly been put there so that whoever was riding inside would be able to change the elevator's direction if needed, since its original course was electronically controlled from outside. Solo pressed the lower of the two buttons, keeping his finger on it, and listened to the pounding of his heart.

The panel closed. The elevator began to drop. Solo took the automatic from his trousers and held it ready in his right hand. He wanted to get the lowest floor of the THRUSH fortress. He did not know what he would find there; for all he realized it would be the living quarters of the THRUSH guards.

But there was one thing he did know, and that was the fact that there had to be an outside entrance somewhere on that initial floor. He remembered the road that had been carved from the mountainside. And since there was a road, THRUSH would have vehicles—jeeps, most likely—and the logical place for them to be kept would be on that first floor.

The elevator stopped. Solo took his finger off the button on the wall as the panel began to slide back, holding his breath, squeezing gentle pressure of the trigger of the automatic.

Warehouse.

Solo let his breath out slowly, eyes darting rapidly from side to side. To the left he could see several jeeps, parked in twin rows on the concrete floor. Six, altogether. On his right, he saw a large helicopter, cargo-type, of a manufacture he suspected was THRUSH's. There were crates, skids of glass jars, and other goods stacked near him. Directly ahead was a partitioned area, behind which he could see what looked to be a large control panel. A

single man stood before the panel, his back to Solo. There was no one else in sight.

Solo stepped out of the elevator, walking softly. If he could reach the man at the control board knock him out before he could raise an alarm, he would have enough time to get safely away. He knew how to operate a helicopter, and there had to be a platform somewhere at one end of the warehouse that would serve as a launching area. The control board should be able to give him the answer. He moved swiftly, silently, across the concrete.

He had gone halfway when he heard the shout from his left. He spun there, bringing up the automatic. A man in mechanic's clothes had been working near the jeeps. He was standing now, yelling a warning across to the man at the control board, digging inside his uniform with right hand.

Solo snapped a quick shot just as the man fumbled a gun from his clothes, saw the man spin, toppling backwards to the floor. Solo whirled toward the other man, just in time to see him pull a lever high on the control panel. A wailing, ear-splitting siren began to pulsate throughout the warehouse, echoing shrilly off the walls.

The alarm Solo thought. He's thrown the alarm!

He began to run towards the man, legs driving on the concrete. The man turned, groping at a holster strapped to his belt. He had the gun out of the holster just as Solo reached him, but he had no opportunity to use it. Solo brought his automatic down on the side of the man's head, watching him crumble in a heap on the floor.

Solo looked wildly at the control board, the vibrating howl of the siren screaming at his ears. There was no chance to use one of the helicopters now. THRUSH guards would flood the warehouse in a matter of seconds. His only opening for escape lay in the road outside. Where was the control that operated the entranceway? His eyes swept in frenzied motion at the bank of levers on the board and then stopped on one marked: Main. He grabbed the lever, heart thudding in his chest, and jerked it downward. There was a great, rumbling sound drowning momentarily the wail of the

alarm siren. The entire wall to his right began to spread open. Solo saw the same blue sky, the same snow-capped mountain peaks, he had seen from Dr. Sagine's office. And he saw the road.

He turned again, running for the rows of jeeps. He reached the first jeep in the row, saw the keys dangling from the ignition, and started to clamber inside. Then he stopped, his brain racing.

Got to stop them from following me, he thought. There were five bullets left in the automatic, and five jeeps. One bullet for one tire on each. It would leave him defenseless, without a weapon and without time to get one, but he had no other choice.

Quickly, he ripped a shot into the tires of each of the five jeeps, the left row first and then skirting between them to the right row. He threw the empty gun down, hearing the whir of descending elevators. He jumped into the remaining jeep, twisting the ignition key. The motor roared into life.

Panels slid back in the walls. Armed men emerged from the elevators, milling onto the concrete floor.

Solo let out the clutch. Tires screamed, smoking, and the jeep shot forward. He hunched over the wheel, the crack of revolvers, sounding behind him. He heard a bullet thunk somewhere in the rear of the jeep, others buzzing overhead, and then he was out of the warehouse and onto the dirt road, careering down the winding mountainside.

He drove as fast as he dared, one hand wrapped on the wheel, the other changing gears rapidly, sliding the jeep in and out of the turns. He had made it. It would take them several minutes to change the tires on the remaining jeeps. By that time he would have several miles on them.

Solo knew just about where he was. The river lying below him was the Colorado; one of the mountain peaks in the distance, the highest, was Pike's Peak. That meant he was in the Colorado Rockies, probably near the source of the Colorado River. Rocky Mountain National Park. There would be a ranger station down there somewhere. If he could reach that...

He had gone more than ten miles, losing altitude rapidly, the Colorado River looming larger ahead of him as he neared the canyon through which it flowed, when the jeep began to sputter, its speed diminishing.

At first, Solo could not understand the loss of speed. He geared down. The engine coughed again. Then Solo's gaze held on the dashboard, and he knew immediately, with a sense of burning frustration, what had happened.

The bullet that he had heard lodge in the rear of the jeep must have hit the gas tank. The needle on the fuel gauge read empty.

THREE

Napoleon Solo did not know what to do. If he tried to go down the road the rest of the way on foot, THRUSH would have him in a matter of minutes. There was nothing but mountain, granite bluffs, to his left, and nothing but the canyon to his right. And on top of that, he was unarmed.

The engine on the jeep died. Solo brought it to a halt, angling it across the road. That would slow them somewhat, but not nearly long enough. He clambered out and stood staring down into the canyon.

Could he hide? No, that was out. How long could he stay hidden? THRUSH would have patrols on the road and in the area. No, he couldn't hide, he couldn't go down the road on foot, he...

He saw the railroad tracks then. Hope surged inside him. The tracks lay on the side of the canyon wall, almost a hundred feet down. They were abandoned, partially hidden by rocks and dirt, and that was why he hadn't seen them at first. Part of the tracks had begun to sag, crumbling away to leave nothing but thin ledges in the already narrow bed.

The tracks had to lead somewhere, Solo knew. Even abandoned, they still had to tie in to a main rail line. All he had to do was follow them, keeping hidden from the THRUSH pursuers.

The canyon wall, dropping away to the floor and the river below, was steep and irregular. It would be precarious, climbing down, but Solo knew it was the only way. He could detect eroded holes in the granite that, if he were extremely careful, would yield foot and handholds.

He started down. It was late afternoon, and although the sun was out, the wind carried the chill of snow. There would be a flurry tonight, perhaps even a storm. If he were caught unprotected at night here in the Rockies, he would freeze to death before morning.

Cold sweat stuck Solo's clothes to his body as he worked his way down the canyon wall. Foothold, hands digging into the slippery granite, another foothold, all with tortuous slowness. Once, his foot slipped, and he almost lost his grip. His body dangled for a split instant above the tracks and the nothingness beyond. Then his clutching hands and feet caught, held, and he closed his eyes, not daring to look down.

He reached the tracks after what seemed like an eternity. He stood leaning against the wall of rock, feet planted solidly on the track bed, dragging the chill air into his lungs. Which way? he thought. Left or right?

He looked to the left. The tracks ran along the canyon wall and then curved out of sight. He could see where much of the tracks had been torn away by erosion and falling rocks.

He looked to the right. The tracks were sloped slightly downward until they, too, disappeared around the curve of the canyon. They looked passable as far as he could see. He went to the right. He walked carefully, watching his feet. The last thing he wanted was an inadvertent slip on one of the rocks there, and a possible slide.

Solo rounded the curve of the tracks along the wall, ears straining. He thought he heard the whine of jeep engines above him. He stopped, hugging the granite.

He saw the trestle.

The tracks dropped sharply some fifty feet, then veered to the left, following the line of the canyon face. The distance across the canyon itself at this point was fairly narrow, and it was here that the trestle spanned the two walls. It was supported by rusted steel that had been sunk and anchored into the granite on both sides. A sagging, wooden snow shed covered the length of the trestle.

Solo could see that the tracks began to drop steeply on the opposite wall. They led down out of the mountains, all right. Just as he had thought. He started down the tracks toward the trestle.

Solo heard the helicopter then. A cold ball of ice knotted his stomach. He stopped, looking upward. It was moving out over the trestle from the granite behind him. He saw two men inside.

It was the helicopter he had seen inside the warehouse at the THRUSH fortress. Solo had forgotten about it. He should have known they would send it up to search for him. He leaned back against the canyon wall. Maybe they wouldn't see him.

The helicopter, hovering above the canyon, rotor blades whirring, started to rise, banking to his left, away from him. They hadn't seen him. His relief was short-lived. The chopper halted its climb, sat motionless in the air like a giant hummingbird for an instant, and then started back.

Solo saw one of the men inside leaning out, and sunlight flashed off something metallic. Machine gun. They'd seen him, all right. And they were moving in for the kill.

Solo was trapped, and he knew it. He was the proverbial sitting duck, a naked target against the granite wall. There was no place to hide. No place...Then suddenly he thought of the trestle!

If he could reach it, get inside, they couldn't get at him with the machine gun. But what good would it do? They could hover up there for hours, keep him trapped inside until more members of THRUSH reached him along the tracks.

Maybe I should just stay here and get it over with now, Solo thought helplessly. No, he couldn't think that way. As long as there was a chance, no matter how slim, he had to take it. The fate of the world was at stake.

The helicopter was coming closer. He saw the man with the machine gun leaning out. The chopper was close enough so that Napoleon Solo could see the man's face. He was one of the three men who had run him and Illya off the road in Teclaxican, one of the men responsible for his friend's death.

Solo gritted his teeth, turned, and began to run toward the trestle, his feet skidding on the rocky surface, unmindful of the danger of falling now with an even greater danger overhead.

The man in the helicopter fired a short burst from the machine gun. Solo heard the bullets chunk into the granite where he had been standing, spraying chips of rock at his back.

Solo stumbled in his light, staggering, and then regained his balance. More bullets from the chattering Thompson gun overhead nipped at his heels, splattered into the granite. Miraculously none hit him.

He reached the trestle and ducked into the cover of the snow shed, leaning against one of the wooden walls, fighting for breath. He could hear the copter whirring over the shed.

Solo wiped sweat from his eyes and looked downward. His heart jumped into his throat. If he had taken another ten steps in his blind flight he would have fallen to his death on the canyon floor below.

Part of the wooden ties supporting the tracks had long since dropped away. One of the rails hung loosely there, about to give way. The other, on the side Solo stood, still seemed to be solid. It was the only passage, and a hazardous one, through the trestle. It would take careful footwork to get past the yawning hole.

Solo closed his eyes, his breathing returning to normal. There was nothing he could do now but steel himself for the rush he would have to make on

the open tracks down the other canyon wall.

He was aware of the sound of the helicopter outside. But the noise of its rotos did not seem to be overhead; it was opposite the shed wall across from him. It seemed to be dropping. Why would they...

He saw the tip of one of the helicopter blades through the hole in the tracks, and he knew in that instant what they were doing. He felt the chill of fear move up his spine. They were going to come after him from beneath the trestle.

They rust have known about the hole, known that there was no place Solo could hide from them. If he went back the way he had come, they would climb and pick him off. And there was not enough time for him to work his way across that single rail to the other side of the hole.

There was no escape.

The helicopter hove into view below him, and Solo saw the evil, grinning face of the man with the machine gun as he leaned out, raising the weapon up towards him. Solo hugged the wooden wall behind him in helpless panic, waiting for the bullets to tear into his body.

ACT V: ONE-WAY DEATH STREET

Come in and sit down," Estrellita Valdone said. "There will be a short wait before we depart."

"I'll stand, thank you," Illya said. He was still looking at the gun clenched in her hand.

The man standing behind Illya Kuryakin jammed the gun muzzle into his back and shoved him inside the warehouse office. "The lady said sit down, friend," the man said. "You do like she tells you."

There was a single, straight-backed chair next to the desk. Illya sat down. The man came inside the office and stood near the door. He was tall and angular, with a bloodless slash for a mouth, and dressed in khakis similar to Estrellita's.

Illya leaned back in the chair, resting one hand on the corner of the desk in a position of apparent relaxation. But inside, his muscles were taut, wound like a steel spring, ready to explode if the slightest opportunity for escape were to present itself.

"Well," Illya said. "Nice little THRUSH trap you've baited here. Too bad you're going to be caught up in it yourself."

Estrellita Valdone smiled her cold smile. "Really?" "There are ten U.N.C.L.E. agents waiting outside," Illya told her. "I should think they'll be battering down the doors any second now."

The angular man gave a short, barking laugh. "Won't work, friend. We were watching when you came up. You were alone, all right."

"When I came, yes," Illya said smiling. "But were you watching the front when I knocked on the rear door?"

The man frowned, looking at Estrellita. She said, "You don't really expect us to believe that, do you?"

Illya Kuryakin shrugged.

The angular man seemed uncertain. "What if he's telling the truth?"

"He's not telling the truth, Benson," Estrellita said. "It's an old trick. He wants to make us believe there are U.N.C.L.E. agents outside so I will have you go out to look. Then he'll be alone here with me. It would be much easier for him to overpower one person, and a woman at that. Isn't that correct, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya shrugged again, his face impassive. Estrellita Valdone had guessed that he was lying, and had guessed his purpose behind the lie.

Now he had to contend with both Estrellita and the man named Benson. And they were well trained, standing apart from one another, watching him carefully. When he made his move, as he knew he must, it had to be quick and sure, with no margin for error. Perhaps if he could get them talking, distract them somehow-

He said, "What are we waiting for, if you don't mind telling me?"

"A telephone call," Estrellita said. "When we receive it, five minutes from now, we shall take you to where Mr. Solo is."

"And just where the devil might that be?"

The cold smile flashed again. "You will learn that, Mr. Kuryakin, when you arrive there."

At the end of that five-minute period,- as Estrellita had said, the telephone rang. She took a single step to where the phone was perched on the opposite side of the desk from where Illya sat. She caught up the receiver.

Illya's eyes followed her. It was then that he became aware of the paperweight.

It was a large, oblong piece of black onyx, highly-polished, and it sat on top of a sheaf of bills of lading on the half of the desk nearest Illya. His hand, resting on the desk where he had placed it when he sat down in the chair, was only inches away from the paperweight.

Illya looked at it, took his eyes away, and stared straight ahead. That piece of polished onyx represented a possible opening. He tensed the muscles in his legs, planting the toes of his shoes solidly on the floor.

Estrellita seemed to be listening intently to whatever was being said on the other end of the wire. Then she said, "Yes," just that single word and nothing else, and hung up the receiver. She started to move away from the phone.

Eyes still staring straight ahead, Illya said a silent prayer that he would remember the exact position of the piece of onyx. Then his arm lifted, darting sideways, and he felt his fingers close over the glossy surface. His eyes flicked right.

Well, he thought, this is no time to be a gentleman. And he threw the paperweight at Estrellita Valdone.

In the same motion, he came up off the chair, toes digging for leverage against the floor, and hurtled his crouched body at Benson. He heard Estrellita's sharp cry of pain, and the thud of the automatic as it flew from her hand and bounced on the floor, and he knew his hurried aim had been accurate. Then his shoulder slammed with jarring force into a surprised, off-guard Benson's midsection.

The force of Illya's charge pushed Benson backwards, and the crack of his head against the door jamb resounded dully, music to Illya's ears. Benson squeezed the trigger of his own gun as he hit the jamb, a reflex action, but his arm had been pushed to one side by the contact and the bullet thudded harmlessly into the wall.

The angular man slid unconscious to the floor, Illya on top of him. Illya Kuryakin tore at the gun in Benson's fingers, pulled it free, and then rolled over the prone form, coming up on one knee with the gun up and ready in his hand.

Estrellita was sitting on the floor in front of the desk, holding her right arm. Her eyes were squeezed shut in silent pain.

Illya Kuryakin leaned back against the desk, passing his left hand through his blonde hair. "Now, Miss Valdone, suppose we play twenty questions."

Estrellita's black eyes were open now, filled with pain and hatred. "I won't tell you anything," she said defiantly. "Not a thing."

"We'll see about that." Illya took his U.N.C.L.E. communicator from the pocket of his suit and thumbed out the antenna. "Open Channel D, please," he said.

TWO

Illya Kuryakin, Mr. Waverly and two other U.N.C.L.E. agents, specialists in the art of interrogation, spent two hours questioning Estrellita Valdone at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

They questioned her individually and collectively, using every known verbal trick of extracting information. They flung questions with rapid-fire quickness, trying to confuse her. They made seemingly irrelevant queries, carefully phrased, hoping she would let slip the slightest bit of useful knowledge.

But Estrellita Valdone, whatever else she might be, was also extremely loyal. She remained adamantly silent. The man named Benson refused to tell them anything either.

Illya and Mr. Waverly, having left the specialists to continue the interrogation, were now seated in Waverly's office. Illya had become increasingly mired in futility. They had the answers right there, not two

doors away from them, yet they couldn't pry them loose from the two THRUSH agents. And time was running short.

The two men sat in strained silence. Waverly was pouring over a recent batch of reports from U.N.C.L.E. offices throughout the world, reports which told him nothing he did not already know. Illya watched his superior shake his head sadly. The tension inside him was about to reach a boiling point.

There was a knock on Waverly's door. He pressed one of the buttons on his desk and the door opened, admitting an agent named Bradshaw, who Illya knew slightly, from Intelligence Section IV.

Waverly looked up as Bradshaw approached his desk. "Yes?"

"I have the reports on Benson and the Valdone woman you asked for, sir," Bradshaw said. "Took us some time to run them down."

Waverly took the papers Bradshaw handed him. "What were you able to ascertain?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Bradshaw said. "We have no files on Estrellita Valdone; she's either a new recruit or an agent that THRUSH had kept well-hidden. Apparently she really is a model in Mexico City, lives alone in an apartment there, but beyond that we draw a blank."

"And Benson?"

"No known THRUSH activities," Bradshaw said. "At least, no definite connection with them. But he's got a criminal record-strong-arm stuff, mostly-that dates back several years."

Waverly was reading one of the papers Bradshaw had given him. He frowned slightly, tugging at his ear lobe. "Interesting item here," he said. "I expect if we were to confront our Mr. Benson with this bit of information, he might become more amenable to answering our questions. What do you think, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya sat up straighter on his chair, taking the paper from Waverly. He read it over. "Perhaps he might, at that," Illya said, determination replacing some of the tenseness inside him "Shall we find out?"

"Indeed," Waverly said, rising.

THREE

Benson sat on a straight-back chair in one of the U.N.C.L.E. interrogation rooms down the hall from Waverly's office. He sat stiffly, apparently somewhat bothered by the constant questioning, but remaining obstinately quiet.

Waverly spoke softly to the two interrogators, and they left the room, leaving Benson alone with he and Illya.

Illya said, "Have you decided to talk yet?"

Benson said nothing, glaring up at him.

Illya smiled faintly. "How many times have you been in prison, Benson?"

"What?" Benson said, startled at the sudden turn in questions.

"Three, isn't it?" Illya asked him. "Once for assault with a deadly weapon. Two years. Twice for armed robbery. Four years and, eight years. Three different terms, Benson."

"So what?" The angular man said, not quite understanding.

"Just this," Illya told him. "In your language, that makes you a three-time loser. Surely you know what it means if you're convicted of another crime."

Comprehension touched Benson's eyes. The color drained from his face.

"That's right," Illya said. "Life imprisonment. Without possibility of parole. The rest of your life behind bars, Benson."

"Wait a minute," Benson said. "Listen, I haven't committed any crime. You can't prove anything against me."

"Can't we? You held a gun on me in that warehouse. You threatened me with it. That constitutes assault. And if you want more, there's the fact that you're a convicted felon in possession of firearms. I shouldn't think we'd have any problem proving guilt."

Benson's eyes were wild. Illya Kuryakin knew he had struck home, just as he had hoped Many men of Benson's breed possessed an innate fear of being caged, and he was no exception.

The angular man wet his lips. "Are you offering me a deal?" He said. "I tell you what you want to know, and you forget about what happened in the warehouse, is that it?"

"We are not in a position to offer a 'deal', as you put it," Waverly said. "However, if you were to volunteer assistance of your own accord, I expect a court would be inclined to lenient action. We would be willing to testify in your behalf, naturally."

"What about THRUSH?" Benson said. "They would kill me if they knew I gave out information."

"We can offer you every possible protection," Waverly told him. "THRUSH need never know what you tell us here tonight."

Again, Benson wet his lips. He seemed to be weighing in his mind the possibilities. His fear of imprisonment, even greater than his fear of T H RUSH, won out finally. He said, "All right. I'll tell you what I know."

Illya had been holding his breath. He let it out slowly. "Where were you taking me tonight?"

"I don't know," Benson said.

"I thought you agreed to cooperate," Illya Kuryakin said, anger necking his voice.

"I don't know where they were taking you," Benson said. "That's the truth. I swear it. The woman, Estrellita, was the only one who knew."

"All right," Illya said. "Tell us about the salt chemical."

"It's being developed at a secret hideaway," Benson said. "I don't know where."

"What's the name of the man behind the project?"

"I don't know that either," Benson said.

"Just what do you know?"

"Yesterday, I received a coded message," Benson said. He passed a hand nervously across his face. "I'd gotten them before. I was part of the team that conducted tests on the salt chemical. We never knew where the tests were taking place until we received the message."

Illya Kuryakin nodded, looking at Waverly. Now they were getting somewhere.

"This message you received yesterday," he said. "What did it say?"

"It gave a time and a date. Seven o'clock, the twenty-third."

"That's today!"

Benson nodded. "And it gave the name of a town. Pardee."

"You were supposed to go there?"

"Yes. Go there and wait for instructions."

"Pardee," Waverly said, trying to place the name. "Pardee."

Benson took a long, sighing breath. "It's on the Colorado River," he said.

"Of course!" Waverly said. "The Colorado—River! Come long, Mr. Kuryakin. We have work to do."

They left Benson in the care of the two interrogators waiting outside and returned to Waverly's office

Waverly said, "Seven o'clock; Mountain time, most likely. Even so, that would have been, ah, three hours ago."

"Three hours," Illya said, nodding. "That salt chemical has already been introduced into the Colorado."

"Yes," Waverly said. "And from the town of Pardee, I should think. Pardee. Where is that town?"

He went to the huge full-scale world map located on one wall of his office, switched on the light above it, and peered at the section depicting the midwestern United States. "Here it is," he said, his finger touching a tiny dot in Eastern Utah. "The Wasatch Mountain."

"What good does our knowing exactly where the chemical was put into the Colorado River do us?" Illya asked. "We can't stop the crystallization process without the antidote."

"Perhaps not," Waverly said. "But if the original process is as slow as we suspect it to be from our discoveries at THRUSH test sites, there is the possibility we can prevent the entire Colorado River from crystallizing, thereby saving the fertile crop lands in Arizona and Southern California."

Illya realized then what Waverly meant. "Hoover Dam!"

"Precisely." Waverly said. "I'm going to put through a call immediately to the Secretary of the Interior at Washington and have his office instruct the personnel at Hoover Dam to close the locks. If that chemical hasn't reached

the dam as yet, we can stop it before millions of dollars in damage can be wreaked."

"Do you want me to go to Pardee?" Illya asked. "THRUSH might still be in the area."

"I think not," Waverly said. "We'll let our people in Salt Lake City handle that. You'll fly directly to Hoover Dam."

Illya Kuryakin, with long pent-up emotions, was more than anxious to start. He was already on his way out the door.

FOUR

As he stood with his back braced against the wooden wall of the snow shed, looking down through the hole in the trestle floor at the hovering helicopter and the upraised machine gun, Napoleon Solo was struck with an intense, panic-tinged desire for self-preservation.

He knew he could not simply stand there like an immobile target in a shooting gallery. If nothing else, he had to male an effort, make a run for it, no matter how vain it may be. Solo moved just as the grinning THRUSH agent below him squeezed the trigger on the machine gun.

He leapt forward, across the crumbling ties, to the shed wall on the opposite side. He heard the chatter of the Thompson gun and saw a criss-cross of holes appear in the wall where he had been standing, showering splinters. Solo looked down through the hole. The front half of the propeller blades showed there; he was partially hidden from their view for the moment.

He looked through the length of the trestle. Not enough time there. There was only one way for him to go, and that was back the way he had come, back up the open trackbed. He tensed his body, staring down through the hole again. They were coming directly beneath him now. He could feel the wind from the spinning rotors. The noise of the helicopter filled the trestle, pounding against his ears.

Wait, he told himself. Wait until they're—

He saw it then. He saw it fully, for the first time, and his heart skipped a single beat. Hope all but dead inside him until then, surged, began to grow, replacing the resignation inside him, as an idea formed in his mind.

What Solo had seen was the long, steel section of rail that hung loosely on the side he was now standing on. The ties beneath it had been the ones that had given way, forming the hole in the bed, and the rail tilted downward slightly, touching empty space. It was still welded to the length of rail nearest him, but the welding was rusted and cracked nearly through.

He dropped to one knee, feeling the rotting ties beneath his feet give with a sharp creak. He reached out his right hand, grasping the rail lightly a few inches above the weld, and pressed downward, using the entire weight of his arm.

He heard the rusted metal rend, the sound loud, louder in his ears than the whirring helicopter below. The heavy rail dipped forward sharply. For a wild instant, Solo thought that it had snapped free completely. Not yet! his mind screamed. He threw himself prone, grabbing onto the rail with both hands, cupping them underneath.

The rail wobbled in his hands, still attached to the other by the thin piece of weld. Solo felt the pressure that the weight of the solid piece of steel exerted on his forearms, the tautness of the tendons and muscles there, and he knew he could not hold it for long. When that last connecting piece of weld snapped

Sweat rolled from his forehead into his eyes. His vision blurred. He leaned his head against one straining shoulder and rubbed the wetness away on the rough cloth of his shirt.

The helicopter was still maneuvring beneath him. He could see half of it now, the whirling, singing blades, part of the glass dome covering the cockpit, the huge, brown cargo body beneath it.

The helicopter sat motionless, half-in and half-out of Solo's view. His hands were white around the rail, and the pressure on his arms was unbearable. I can't hold it, he thought. I can't...

The chopper began to move. It dipped forward, banking under the trestle, under the hole in the track bed, and Solo saw the pilot then and in the next instant the man with the machine gun. The blades of the copter were tilted forward, directly beneath him now, and the body was raised out and to the side of the trestle wall.

The man with the machine gun saw him then. He saw Solo's head and arms extending out over the hole, and the grin contorted his face as it had before, and he raised the Thompson gun, leaning out of the helicopter doorway.

Solo let go of the rail. He felt the- release of pressure from his arms and heard the sharp crack as the last piece of steel snapped free.

The end of the rail nearest him jolted upward, narrowly missing Solo's chin, and then it plunged down through the hole.

There was just enough time for Solo to see the face of the man with the machine gun, to see the grin change into an expression of pure terror, and then the steel rail crashed with tremendous force into the rotating blades of the helicopter.

There was the grinding, tortured scream of twisted metal, the shattering sound of the glass dome breaking, and Solo saw one of the chopper blades, ripped in half, skim through the air and splinter against the granite canyon wall across from him.

The helicopter began to plunge. It dropped straight down at first, rotors crippled, and then it began to spin, a lazy, revolving spin, almost as if it were falling in slow motion. It grew smaller, smaller, trailing black smoke, a mere speck, and then it disappeared on the canyon floor below. It was quiet again.

Solo lay panting inside the trestle, head cradled in his arms at the edge of the hole. A fever-weakness seemed to have seized him. His chest heaved, and his arms felt slightly numb. He wanted to lay there, rest, just rest. Fatigue had seeped into every corner of his body.

But he got to his knees, and then, his fingers clawing at the rough shed wall, to his feet. He swallowed into a sore, parched throat. The helicopter would have radioed his position, Solo knew. THRUSH agents would be coming along the tracks after him at any moment. He still wasn't out of danger yet.

Solo stood hanging on to the shed wall. The only way past the hole, as he had seen before, was across that single steel rail. Legs rubbery, he stepped to the opposite side again. The ties beneath his feet did not seem any too sturdy. He knelt quickly there, testing the solidarity of the rail with his hand. It seemed firm enough to hold him.

Sweat drenched his entire body. He took a long breath, held it, and exhaled slowly. Then he stepped up onto the rail. It creaked, rocking faintly under him. Facing the shed wall, he leaned his body forward, both hands flat against the wood for balance, and to take his full weight from the rail.

He began to move his feet sideways, slowly, inching his way across the slippery piece of steel. He stared straight ahead, eyes on his hands as he slid them along the wall.

Splinters gouged into his skin, but he paid no attention to the stinging pain.

After what seemed like an eternity, he reached the other side of the hole. He paused there momentarily, breathing deeply, rubbing sheets of sweat from his face and eyes.

He walked through the trestle cautiously, watching the trackbed below him, bypassing ties and rails that looked to be rotted through or about to give way, stopping to test with his hands and feet areas that he was-not sure of. Finally, he reached the end of the trestle and stepped onto the solid ground of the tracks on the other canyon wall.

He wanted to pause there, rest his aching body. But the feel of the ground, its stability, seemed to instill new purpose in him, and he moved onward along the tracks without stopping.

He moved downward, in close to the granite, and when he reached the point where the tracks curved around the canyon wall, he turned, looking across to the wall facing him over the gorge. He saw no one. His breathing became easier. He went around the curve of the tracks and out of sight from the THRUSH pursuers he knew would be following him.

He walked for hours. Afternoon began to give way to night. It grew colder, and he saw clouds forming in the sky above him. It would snow soon, and when it did he would have to reach shelter. He knew the consequences if he didn't. He was already chilled to the marrow. He reached the timberline just as it began to get dark.

Solo saw, as he rounded a bend, that the tracks fell into a long, steep incline, and at the bottom and growing sparsely up the side of the mountain there, was a thick forest of Colorado Blue Spruce. The mountains above him through which he had been making his way, gave way to pitted -gullies and long, flat stretches of woodland.

He had made it out of the Rockies. He began to run. He ran, lurching, stumbling over rocks, down the incline, running almost blindly in the twilight. His breath choked from his lungs in wheezing gasps. But still he ran.

Solo reached the bottom of the incline, smelling the odor of pine and moss, and the chill, building snow in the air. He ran along the trackbed, through the trees, and he stopped running, slowing into a staggering walk, only when his tortured lungs screamed for relief and threatened to burst through his chest.

It had begun to snow when he saw the road. The snow was light at first, thin, misty flakes. It mixed with the gathering darkness to make front and peripheral vision difficult, and when he saw the road he thought his mind was playing tricks on him.

Solo stopped, peering ahead of him. The road bisected the tracks, disappearing into the forest on both sides. But there was a road!

He began to run again and halted where the road crossed the tracks. It was rutted, passable only by jeep, little more than a fire trail. But it had been used often, and recently judging from the freshness of the tire treads he saw there. That had to mean it led to a ranger station; yes, he was sure of it. A ranger station, a fire-prevention outpost, some place where he could get help.

He tried to remember how the terrain had looked from his earlier elevation. To the left, a thick forestland of blue spruce, unbroken wilderness. To the right, higher ground. Ranger stations were always built on higher ground to protect them from the possible danger of fire.

Napoleon Solo turned to the right. He tried to run, but his right leg had grown numb. The gash he had received in Mexico, plus the chilling cold and the countless falls, had begun to take their toll. He could move only in a half-shuffling, half-walking step.

The snow began to flurry, building into a storm. He could see only a few feet in front of him. He had become almost oblivious to the cold, and he knew that was one of the first signs a man experienced before freezing. He knew it, but he could not seem to fight off the torpor that took hold of him, the lethargic feeling of drowsiness.

The road seemed to widen. He saw that, even through the swirling snow, and at first it had no significance for him.

And then he saw the light It glowed ahead of him, a dim yellow, an unblinking yellow eye in the darkness and the falling snow He stared. A light! He had an in sane urge to laugh.

He tried to run, fell to his knees and then sprawled forward. He couldn't get to his feet again; his arms were leaden, frozen from the cold. He began to drag his body toward the light. He tried to call out, but his throat would not

work and no words came out. He realized the uselessness of trying to make himself heard over the howling wind.

As he crawled forward, he could make out the dim outlines of a building, sitting dark and shadowy at the far edge of a clearing. The light shone from a single window beside the door.

He reached the porch of the building and dragged himself up the three wooden steps there. With the last ounce of strength he had left, he threw himself forward against the door, hammering feebly with his frozen hands at its wooden base.

Footsteps sounded inside. The door was pulled open. "My God!" a man's voice said. "Pete! Come here! Quick!"

Hands touched his shoulders, lifting Napoleon Solo inside. He felt warmth, real warmth. He raised his eyes, looking into the face of an alarmed Colorado Forest Ranger, that title displayed across the front of his green uniform shirt.

Solo's throat worked and he forced hoarse words past his lips. "Telephone," he said. "Have you got a telephone?"

"Yes," the ranger said. "What happened?"

Solo didn't hear the rest of it. He felt another pair of hands on his legs, and then he was being lifted. He relaxed his body. He knew, somehow, that it was going to be all right, now.

ACT VI: STAND AND FIGHT

Alexander Waverly received the long distance phone call exactly thirty minutes after Illya Kuryakin had left New York for Hoover Dam.

He had been busy during that thirty minutes. He had put through a call to the Secretary of the Interior in Washington, getting him out of bed, and had explained the situation. The Secretary, obviously alarmed, had agreed to instruct Hoover Dam officials to immediately shut down all facilities. He informed Waverly that an immeasurable amount of damage could be done to the Dam itself, since the huge dynamos inside drew 1,344,800 kilowatts of hydroelectric power from the Colorado River. Both Waverly and the Secretary agreed that the entire affair should be kept as quiet as possible in the interest of public safety and wellbeing.

Waverly had then contacted the U.N.C.L.E. district office in Salt Lake City, directing the agent-in-charge to dispatch a group of operatives to Pardee. He gave a quick outline of what they were to be looking for, and of the circumstances in general.

He had been about to radio the U.N.C.L.E. Air Command, to order them to conduct a thorough air reconnaissance of the entire upper half of the Colorado River, when the call came through on his private line.

The man on the other end of the wire identified himself as a Colorado State Forest Ranger named Emmett, Ranger Station 17, Rocky Mountain National Park. He said that a man, half-frozen almost delirious, had stumbled to their door over an hour before. After asking if they had a telephone, Emmett said, the man had passed out, and they had administered hurried first aid. When the man regained consciousness, he had given them Waverly's private number and implored them to put the call through without delay, it was a matter of the utmost urgency, involving national security.

Waverly's brain was whirring like the well-organized computer it was. "The name of this man, please?"

"He says he is Napoleon Solo."

Faint traces of what might have been a smile touched Waverly's stoical features. He asked, "Is Mr. Solo able to speak with me?"

"I can't keep him in bed, weak as he is," Emmett said. "He's right over my shoulder."

Solo came on the line. He began talking immediately, his voice hoarse, only barely audible over the long-distance wire. He detailed everything that he had learned, everything that had happened to him, beginning with Estrellita Valdone and his exposure to the nerve gas. He dwelled at length on his encounter with Dr. Mordecai Sagine.

Waverly listened intently. When Solo had finished, he explained that U.N.C.L.E. had learned only a short time ago that the Colorado River was the initial prime THRUSH target, and related the pertinent details surrounding Illya's capture of Estrellita Valdone and the man named Benson.

"Illya!" Solo interrupted. "Illya's alive?"

"Yes, he's alive, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "Did you believe him dead?"

Waverly could hear the relieved sigh Napoleon Solo emitted on the other end. Solo related rapidly that he had thought Illya killed in the accident in Mexico, and that THRUSH hadn't led him to believe any different while he was being held captive.

Waverly said, "I have sent Mr. Kuryakin to Hoover Dam. It has been shut down completely in an effort to stop crystallization of the entire Colorado River."

"The chemical was supposed to have been introduced at seven o'clock, Mountain Time," Solo said. "Over three hours ago. Yes, there might still be time."

"You say that the Colorado was only to be a test?" Waverly asked.

"The final test," Solo said. "The first step in THRUSH's singular offensive. Once THRUSH Council has been satisfied, then their entire operation will swing into full-scale, simultaneous action."

Waverly tapped his pen on the desk top absently. "I was afraid THRUSH were planning something along those lines," he said. "Every major body of fresh water in the world, eh? Unless I miss my guess, THRUSH will waste no time once the Colorado is crystallized. No time at all."

"Tomorrow some time, then," Solo said. "Tomorrow morning!"

"Exactly, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "And once THRUSH realizes that we know of their little plot, which they shall when only the upper section of the Colorado succumbs to the chemical, they will attempt to take prompt advantage of the upper-hand they hold before we can react further. Tomorrow morning is rather a safe assumption, I should think."

"Which means we've got to stop them before they can get underway," Solo said.

Waverly said, "The salt chemical is being manufactured at the fortress in the Rocky Mountains, is that correct?"

"Yes," Solo said. "Manufactured in aggregate amounts, judging from what I saw." "Is it being stored there for later transportation, do you think? Or have they previously transferred quantities of it elsewhere?"

"Some, possibly," Solo said. "But I'd say most of the chemical—is still at the fortress. They were working like beavers bottling the stuff today. I think they plan to take it out by helicopter."

"Most likely to a hidden THRUSH air base," Waverly said. "It would be a simple task for their jets to convey the chemical to any section of the world in a matter of hours." He paused, deep in thought. "If we can penetrate their

fortress and seize the chemical, we shall nip the entire maneuver before it begins. Do you know its exact location, Mr. Solo?"

"I think so," Solo said. "The rangers have a geographical map here, and I've been going over it." He gave Waverly the longitude and latitude, according to the map.

"I am going to send interceptor planes into the area immediately," Waverly told him. If THRUSH attempts to transport the chemical tonight, we shall see that they do not succeed."

"How do you propose to get inside the fortress?" Solo asked him. "It's solid concrete and steel, built into the hollow of the mountain. Not bombs, surely. The antidote would be destroyed, as well as the chemical and the formulas for them."

"Not bombs," Waverly assured him. "I believe I have the answer to that problem. The road you mentioned, leading up to the fortress. Do you know where it begins?"

"There are two roads, I think. The main one begins several miles northwest of where I am now," Solo said. "A mining community called Granite River." He gave its exact location.

"I will expedite a full U.N.C.L.E. raiding unit to Granite River as quickly as possible. They will mobilize there, and at dawn attack the fortress."

"I had better lead the unit," Solo said. "I know the area now."

"No, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "You have been through quite enough. You are to remain at the ranger station. In bed."

I've been on this assignment from the start," Solo said stubbornly. "I want to be in on it at the finish."

"You are to remain at the Ranger station," Waverly repeated in a firm voice. "That is an order, Mr. Solo."

"But sir..."

"An order, I repeat! " Waverly barked. He hung up.

Waverly sat staring at the silent receiver. He knew Napoleon Solo's carefree, almost indifferent, attitude toward his job with U.N.C.L.E. was just an elaborate facade hiding the true, dedicated patriot within.

TWO

At the first yellowish rays of dawn the following morning, Illya Kuryakin stood on the observation deck of Hoover Dam. A chill, whistling wind tugged at his heavy mackinaw, numbing his face beneath the parka hood.

At the base of the dam stretching upstream as far as he could see, was a frozen, stilled floor of white. Lake Mead, the lake formed by the presence of Hoover Dam and extending some one-hundred fifteen miles upstream, and beyond that the raging Colorado River, were now nothing more than rock salt.

Beside Illya, the director of Hoover Dam said, "We closed all the locks and spillways, and shut down the dynamos, as soon as we received word from Washington last night. It appears as if we were in time."

Illya Kuryakin nodded. Downstream, as he had seen moments before, the Colorado flowed on its natural course. They had managed to halt the crystalisation at the dam, saving, as Waverly had said, thousands of acres of fertile land that depended on the Colorado for irrigation.

Illya had arrived at the Dam a few minutes earlier. He had taken an U.N.C.L.E. jet from New York to Las Vegas, waited impatiently for a heavy storm there to subside, and then had gone by helicopter to Hoover Dam. The entire dam had of course, been blocked off, and the copter had set down without obstruction in the visitor's parking lot.

He had received the news that Napoleon Solo was safe while aboard the jet enroute to Las Vegas. Waverly had radioed, telling him what Solo had

learned and informing him of the course of action U.N.C.L.E. was taking.

Illya had asked Waverly if he could join Solo at Granite River for the assault on the THRUSH fortress in the Rockies, and had been told that he was to continue on to Hoover Dam and remain there until further instructions. Waverly did not elaborate as to his reasons for wanting Illya there.

Illya was dissatisfied. He felt left out of things. He did not want to be stuck here on the concrete dam; the need for positive action, fed by the long hours and days of waiting, was strong inside him. Why had Waverly wanted him to remain here when he could...?

He realized the director was speaking to him "...cold out here," the director said. "Why don't you come down to my office? I have some coffee there."

"All right," Illya said glumly.

Inside the director's office, Illya sat with a steaming cup of black coffee, wondering how the U.N.C.L.E. attack on the THRUSH fortress, now underway, was progressing.

The director, sitting across from him behind a large desk, chewed his lip.

"Frankly, Mr. Kuryakin," he said finally, "This is the gravest situation we've ever faced here. There have been heavy snow storms in the Rockies of late. Because of that, there will be a strong run-off of snow into the Colorado. Will this fresh water crystallize upon contact with the already hardened water?"

"I'm not sure," Illya said. "I should think it would."

"That's what I was afraid of," the director said. "You say there is an antidote for the process?"

"Yes."

"Unless this antidote were placed into the river carefully, in some way regulating the flow of the water, then we are faced with a danger of floods. There is a tremendous volume of water built up in the mountains, and the flow is regulated through our facilities here. But we are only able to handle 4,400,000 cubic yards capacity. Anything above that would have disastrous effects."

"I'll notify our people to use it only with the utmost caution when they confiscate the antidote." Illya did not mention the possibility the assault might fail. He didn't even want to ponder that potentiality.

The director nodded. "It will have to be used soon," he said, "before too great a volume of water can build in the mountains."

Using his U.N.C.L.E. communicator, Illya Kuryakin contacted Mr. Waverly in New York and imparted this information. U.N.C.L.E. headquarters was in a state of suspense waiting to learn how the invasion of the fortress was progressing. To that moment, they had received no communication.

For the next two hours Illya sat in the director's office. The continued inactivity was telling on his nerves. Finally, the immobility became too much for him, and he told the director he was going up to the observation deck again, to get some air.

The chill wind seemed to have increased in velocity outside. Illya walked along the observation deck, hands in the pockets of his mackinaw, brooding. He looked down at the frozen floor of salt, thinking how very close THRUSH had come in this single bid for world domination. And it wasn't over yet. If THRUSH had managed to get a large quantity of the salt chemical out of that mountain fortress.

Waverly had told him that the interceptor planes he had sent into the area the night before had encountered nothing. Unless they got it out before, Illya thought. Better give Mr. Waverly another call. Maybe...

In the quiet of the early morning and with the dynamos in the dam beneath him shut down, Illya heard the helicopter before he saw it.

He tilted his head back, ears straining, peering up into the cold, gray sky. He saw it finally, coming in from the west, across Lake Mead, a tiny speck at first, and then looming larger as it approached the dam.

He thought at first that it was an U.N.C.L.E. helicopter, sent by Mr. Waverly for some reason. But as it neared, he saw that it was smaller, a different model than that used by U.N.C.L.E.

THRUSH! Of course! That was why Waverly had wanted him to remain at Hoover Dam; he had suspected that THRUSH might come there to inspect its handiwork.

Illya turned and began to run toward the helicopter that had brought him to Hoover Dam, sitting silently in the empty parking lot at one end of the observation deck. His blood raced. Finally he was going to get a chance to act.

He reached the helicopter. It was empty. Where was that blasted pilot? He looked again at the approaching helicopter. It had reached the far end of the dam, coming over the bluff there.

No time to look for the pilot now, Illya thought. He slid into the cockpit, fastened the safety belt, and switched on the ignition. He let the rotary blades revolve slowly, warming, and stared upward through the glass dome.

They had seen him. The-other helicopter slowed, halting its approach, and then banked sharply, turning, and started back the way it had come. Illya shoved the throttle on the U.N.C.L.E. copter forward, and it rose, gliding left as he hurriedly maneuverd the controls.

His face grim, Illya chased after the helicopter.

THREE

The U.N.C.L.E. attacking force supplemented by interceptor planes and jet fighters overhead, left the mining community of Granite River a few minutes before daybreak.

Napoleon Solo, weak, frost-bitten hands encased in heavy mittens, fatigue covering him like a blanket after a restless night, had arrived a few minutes earlier in a jeep driven by Emmett. Despite loud protestations from the men present, concerned over his appearance, Solo perversely insisted he was leading the attack, no matter what happened.

The force consisted of roughly a hundred men, specially trained in this type of assignment, flown in from various parts of the country. There were several jeeps, three large canvas-covered trucks, and an arsenal ranging from handguns to small mortars.

Mounted on two of the jeeps were strange-looking black boxes, somewhat larger than fruit crates, and containing a multitude of dials and gauges. Both boxes were covertly watched over by skilled U.N.C.L.E. technicians from New York City.

Upon seeing the boxes, Solo knew immediately how Waverly planned to penetrate the concrete and-steel fortress. Each was capable, he knew, of producing a type of Laser beam, specially modified by U.N.C.L.E. scientists. The beam, used only on rare occasions by U.N.C.L.E. because of the awesome destructive power it possessed, was able to disintegrate, according to intensity, any metal or substance known to man.

Napoleon Solo, riding in the lead jeep, led the convoy up the mountain road. They encountered no resistance. When they reached the end of the road leading upward from Granite River, they found a second road, its entrance well hidden, that would deploy into the mountains to the right. This second road had been apparently built by THRUSH, since neither of the forest rangers professed any knowledge of it.

The convoy entered this second road. Overhead, one of the U.N.C.L.E. intercept jets radioed via the short wave band in Solo's jeep that no THRUSH opposition awaited them outside the entrance to the fortress. Solo reasoned that THRUSH had lookouts in the immediate area, and that they knew of U.N.C.L.E.'s pending arrival, and of the jets. Apparently, he

decided, THRUSH felt their fortress was impenetrable, and were content to stave off the U.N.C.L.E. attack from within.

They came in sight of the sloping granite wall that hid the entrance to the fortress minutes later. Acting with well-organized speed, the U.N.C.L.E. force began to mobilize. Men dismounted from the trucks and jeeps, weapons were loaded, and the boxes housing the deadly Laser beams were carefully lifted to the ground and placed in readiness.

One of the jets, fighter-equipped, made passes directly overhead, waiting. When the U.N.C.L.E. unit was at attack-ready, Solo turned to where the technicians hovered about the Laser boxes. The mountain road was still and silent. The tension in the chill, snow-tinged air was electric.

Napoleon Solo gave the command. Buttons were pressed simultaneously on the black boxes. They began to glow with a violent purplish light, blinding if looked at directly, and a low, humming sound came from each. The light and the hum lasted only a single instant, and then the boxes became still again.

The lower portion of the granite wall before them, and the concrete-and-steel behind it, disintegrated.

In that single instant the Laser beams were trained on the wall, a gaping hole appeared there almost magically revealing the warehouse Solo had been in the day before It had been jammed with THRUSH guards, waiting there. Those who had been unlucky enough to be directly in front of the entranceway had caught the glancing impact of the Lasers, and lay now on the concrete floor. Some were dead, others terribly burned by the radiation The rest milled about in panic, the suddenness of the assault turning their rank into chaotic confusion.

The U.N.C.L.E. force, led by Solo, attacked under protective cover of a burst of machine gun fire from the jet above, spraying the mountain road in front of the entrance.

They encountered almost no opposition from the frightened THRUSH guards. The element of surprise, and the awesome destructive power of the Lasers, had made the U.N.C.L.E. penetration of the fortress a quick and, for them, bloodless one.

Leaving some of the agents to guard the prisoners they had taken, Solo led the remainder to the elevators against the left-hand wall. One of the technicians went to the control board behind the partition to the right, found the levers operating the elevators there and brought them all to basement level.

A group of agents rode to each of the three remaining levels of the fortress for search-and-seizure operations. Solo went to the top floor, the laboratory and manufacturing plant.

A state of confusion reigned there. The scientists, workers and guards there were well aware of the U.N.C.L.E. invasion, and were attempting to organize themselves when Solo and the U.N.C.L.E. agents with him emerged from the elevators.

Solo shot one guard, brandishing a machine gun, in the leg, and one of the other operatives winged a white-coated man with a revolver. After that there was no resistance.

Solo, after the THRUSH men had been herded into one section of the laboratory, went immediately to the private lab of Dr. Sagine at the far end. He found it deserted.

"Where is Sagine?" Solo demanded.

The THRUSH men were stony-faced.

Solo singled out a hawk-faced little man with frightened eyes, grabbed him by the scruff of his white-smock and dragged him of to one side.

"Better talk, friend," Solo said. "You will eventually, you know. We have ways..."

It did not take much persuasion on Solo's part to learn that Sagine had left the fortress some time late the previous day, bound for the town of Pardee, in Utah, to supervise the introduction of the salt chemical into the Colorado River. Solo then questioned the man carefully, asking which of the scientists present knew of the formula for the chemical, and of its antidote, and how the antidote was administered. The frightened little man relinquished the answers almost gratefully.

Solo then checked with the balance of the U.N.C.L.E. force on the lower floors. He was told by the leader of each group that everything as under control, that prisoners had been taken.

U.N.C.L.E. now controlled the fortress fully.

One of the U.N.C.L.E. agents in the warehouse also informed Solo that a search had revealed hundreds of jars of chemical there, ready for transportation. The agent had questioned one of the captured guards and had learned that THRUSH had not as yet transferred any out of the fortress. They were waiting to receive word as to the success of the Colorado River venture. As soon as that word had been given, the chemical was to be shipped by helicopter to a hidden THRUSH Air Base near by for distribution throughout the world.

Solo immediately used his communicator to contact Mr. Waverly, waiting in New York, and told him that the assault had been a success. He relayed what the little man had told him about Dr. Sagine, and that his earlier conclusions concerning THRUSH knowledge of the salt chemical and its antidote had been accurate...one of the captured scientists knew the formulas and how they were used and regulated.

"Good," Waverly said, "Mr. Solo, our agents from Salt Lake City have conducted a successful raid on a THRUSH camp in Pardee, Utah. They have confiscated several jars of the salt chemical and what, according to one of the scientists they had captured there, was the antidote. There was no sign of Dr. Sagine, the agents report. If the THRUSH personnel in Pardee knew where he was they weren't talking."

"How about the antidote," Solo queried.

"None of the scientists in the Pardee group professed to know how the antidote was regulated," Waverly said. "Our agents are awaiting instructions."

As Waverly remained on stand-by, Solo questioned the man who had been designated as having knowledge of Dr. Sagine's chemical. The THRUSH man at first refused to tell Solo anything. But when one of the U.N.C.L.E. agents found what appeared to be the formula for the chemical processes in Dr. Sagine's private lab, and when Solo told the man that if they were too late to prevent floods, because of the time it would take for U.N.C.L.E. chemists to learn the proper usage, then the man could be held directly responsible for whatever carnage was wreaked. The THRUSH scientist finally acquiesced, telling Solo everything he knew.

Solo hurriedly relayed the information to Mr. Waverly, just as the scientist had told it to him. Waverly listened carefully, making sure that he had the exact dosage of the antidote to be placed in the water to prevent flooding, and then had Solo wait while he spoke with the agents in Pardee. The antidote would be administered immediately, in the proper amounts, by an U.N.C.L.E. chemist that Waverly had sent to Pardee in anticipation of that very reason the night before.

When Waverly came back on Channel D, Solo said, "What about Dr. Sagine, sir?"

"We don't know where he is at present," Waverly said, "though I have my suspicions. I expect he is checking on the results his chemical has had on the Colorado River. By helicopter, I should think, since that appears to be the method of transportation THRUSH used to reach the camp at Pardee."

"Then he could be anywhere along the Colorado," Napoleon Solo said.

"Yes," Waverly said. "As I told you last night, I have sent Mr. Kuryakin to Hoover Dam. Sagine would logically wish to inspect that most important site. But if he had not gone there, then we have U.N.C.L.E. jets in the air

over the entire area along the Colorado north from the Dam. We shall have Dr. Sagine before too long."

Solo allowed himself a small, tired smile.

"It's almost over," he said. "There were times when I wasn't so sure of the outcome."

"Quite so, Mr. Solo," Waverly said laconically. "Quite so."

Solo said, "What do you want me to do now, sir?"

"From the sound of your voice," Waverly said, "I think a hospital bed is in order."

"I'm fine," Solo said wearily.

"Hmm," Waverly said. It was a skeptical sound.

"I'd like to join in the search for Dr. Sagine," Solo said. "There's a small airstrip outside Granite River where one of the jets could land and pick me up."

Waverly seemed to be pondering the request. He said finally, "Very well, Mr. Solo. If you are quite sure you are all right."

"Yes, sir," Solo said. "I'm sure."

He wasn't really sure at all.

FOUR

Illya Kuryakin, piloting the quicker, more durable U.N.C.L.E. helicopter, had drawn to within five hundred feet of the fleeing THRUSH craft when they began firing on him.

Twin bursts of flame erupted from tail guns mounted beneath the cockpit. Illya, reacting instantly, pushed hard left on the throttle, banking. He saw a

long white scratch appear in the glass dome above him as one of the bullets slashed past, and felt a rocking jar as another thunked into the landing gear.

He manipulated the throttle, dipping, cutting the speed momentarily, and then opening up again. The tail guns on the THRUSH helicopter spit more flame, but the hail of bullets passed harmlessly above him.

The U.N.C.L.E. helicopter was likewise equipped with artillery, and Illya wrapped his hand around the firing mechanism, thumb touching the button. But he didn't fire. He could see that there were two men in the machine he was pursuing, the pilot and a squat figure seated beside him. He could not identify the second figure from this distance, but he caught fleeting glimpses of a yellowish mane of hair through the glass dome.

From the picture of Dr. Mordecai Sagine that he had seen on the visi-screen in Waverly's office the day before, he had an idea that the perpetrator of the salt chemical was that second man If this were the case, he knew that U.N.C.L.E. would prefer to have Dr. Sagine alive than dead.

He remembered then that he had not had time to contact Mr. Waverly with this latest development. He caught up the microphone to the radio band there, flicking the send button, and yelled rapidly into it, making himself heard above the whir of the rotor blades overhead.

The wave length was cleared for direct communication with U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York. Illya cut his speed, hanging back now, out of range of the tail guns on the THRUSH helicopter, but still keeping it in plain sight. Waverly's voice came through the microphone, asking the nature of the urgent call.

Rapidly, Illya Kuryakin explained what had happened.

"Are you able to identify the occupants of the THRUSH helicopter?" Waverly's voice asked him.

"Negative," Illya said. "But I could venture a guess."

"Dr. Sagine?"

"Dr. Sagine."

"What is your position, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya glanced below him. He could see the flat, white surface of Lake Mead directly beneath, frozen white in the this morning sunlight. His compass heading was due west. He reported this to Waverly.

"Your instructions are to keep the THRUSH helicopter under surveillance," Waverly said. "Remain at a safe distance. Do you understand, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"Yes, sir."

"There are U.N.C.L.E. jets in the area. I will radio for them to converge on Lake Mead immediately."

"Yes, sir," Illya said again. He asked then how the attack on the THRUSH fortress had gone.

"Satisfactorily," Waverly told him. "It is now in our hands, along with the salt chemical and the antidote

"Napoleon?"

Waverly said that Solo was as well as could be expected under the circumstances, and that one of the U.N.C.L.E. jets had picked him up in Granite River more than an hour ago to join in the search for Dr. Sagine. Then he said, "I will keep this wave length open. Report any changes in direction if they occur.

"All right," Illya said. "I'll..." He broke off, staring out through the glass at the THRUSH helicopter ahead of him. A slight chill nudged his spine.

"Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly's voice said over the radio. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," Illya said. "They've stopped moving forward. Just hovering, now."

But as he said that, the THRUSH machine, hovering, turned in midair, reversing itself to face him. It sat there like that for an instant, and then the pilot leaned forward on the throttle and it began to move at full speed, right at him.

Illya Kuryakin recognized what they were going to attempt to do. They had realized that trying to outrun the faster U.N.C.L.E. helicopter was useless. The only recourse left open to them, if they hoped to escape, was to eliminate the single obstacle that stood in the way of their freedom.

They were attacking.

It was too late to run, even if he wanted to The swiftness of their action had allowed them enough time to narrow the distance between the two helicopters, putting Illya within range of the THRUSH guns. By the time he turned around, they would be on top of him. There was only one thing he could do.

Stand and fight.

"Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly's voice crackled over the radio. "Come in, please."

"Stand by," Illya said, and dropped the microphone. His hand caught the firing mechanism for the U.N.C.L.E. gun mounts, finger poised on the button. He clenched his teeth, waiting.

The THRUSH helicopter opened fire.

Illya shoved hard right on the throttle, pitching him sideways. The first volley of bullets riddled the air where he had been. He hunched over the controls, jamming down on the button, and felt his own guns chattering beneath him. The THRUSH copter veered, dodging as he had done. He knew he had missed.

Dog-fight, he thought. A dog-fight with helicopters. Now if that wasn't...

"What's going on there? Mr. Kuryakin, I hear gunfire. What..."

Slashes of red flame from the fore guns on the THRUSH: chopper drowned out Waverly's words. Illya fought the throttle again, left this time in sidelong bank.

He was too late. The glass in front of him shattered.

Illya threw his left arm across his face, an instinctive motion. He felt a burning pain along his elbow as one of the machine gun slugs furrowed through his skin there, and tiny pinpricks on his forehead and face as the flying glass peppered his vision.

He shook his head, pawing to clear his sight. His hand came away red with blood from the glass cuts. Dimly he saw the THRUSH helicopter moving towards him, coming in for the kill.

Teeth bared in anger and pain, Illya found the firing mechanism he had dropped when the dome splintered. The U.N.C.L.E. copter had lost altitude, the throttle jarred loose from his hand with the impact.

Illya clutched the throttle now, straightening the machine, and then drew back on it, raising his front end and the mounted guns there to the approaching THRUSH aircraft.

He jammed his finger down on the firing button and held it there. The first stream of bullets sheered one of the rotary blades on the THRUSH helicopter. He saw it sputtering, airborne on only a single blade. More slugs smashed into the body, through the glass on the pilot's side. Crippled, it began to descend.

Illya released the pressure on the firing button then. He tested the controls, found that none of the THRUSH bullets had hit vital parts, and went down after them.

The THRUSH helicopter was not crash-falling. The pilot, apparently still alive, was able to maneuver the craft, even with one blade. He could keep it in the air, but not for long. It would have to land.

Illya, hovering above the crippled machine, following it down, resisted the urge to fire on it again.

As they descended, the crystal floor of what had been Lake Mead loomed large and white below. Illya, mouth pulled into a tight line, fumbled for the microphone on the floor. Angry crackling sounds still emerged from the radio, giving indication that it was still operational.

He flicked the send button. "Kuryakin here," he said.

"What happened?" Waverly's voice said through heavy static. "Are you all right? It sounded as if..."

"All right," Illya said shortly. "A shaky moment or two, but everything's under control now."

The THRUSH helicopter landed on the salt surface of the lake.

Illya went directly above them, vacillating there, a hundred feet overhead. He could see the two men in the shattered cockpit. Neither of them moved. The pilot had slumped over the controls.

Illya reported to Waverly. He finished with, "I'm going down for a look."

"Stay where you are," Waverly said sharply. "There are planes..."

"Wait a minute," Illya said. He saw that the second man in the THRUSH helicopter, the man he suspected to be Dr. Sagine, had begun moving. The long yellow hair shone in the sunlight as he clambered his way out of the crippled aircraft, onto the surface on the lake.

The man stood motionless for a moment, peering up into the air. Then he began to run.

"Dr. Sagine!" Illya said into the microphone. "He's alive! Out and running."

He took the U.N.C.L.E. helicopter in the direction the man was running, Dr. Sagine, stopped finally, digging into his pocket. He came up with something that glinted shafts of light in the sun.

A gun, Illya thought. Hand gun. Not much range. But if he can keep me far enough overhead, and if he can reach he shore, the rocks there .

"I'm going down after him," Illya said into the microphone.

"No!" Waverly snapped. "I want you to—"

Abruptly the mike went dead, just as Illya said, "If he reaches the shore, I'll lose him. Can't take that chance."

"I'm going after him," Illya said again, to the silent mike. If Waverly had different ideas it was too late now.

He increased the speed on the U.N.C.L.E. helicopter, passing over the running man, and then turned and took it down, cutting off Dr. Sagine's fight to the opposite shore. He landed, switching off the rotors.

Dr. Sagine veered to the right, running out toward the middle of the lake. Illya dug his U.N.C.L.E. special from his belt and leaped out, running. He chased headlong after the fleeing Dr. Sagine, across the gleaming, bleached-bone whiteness of the crystallized lake.

ACT VII: LAST COMMAND

Napoleon Solo was sitting in the co-pilot s chair of the U.N.C.L.E. jet that had picked him up in Granite River. Eyes closed, he was fighting a losing battle against exhaustion, when Waverly's frantic call came over the radio.

The jet had wound its way down from the Rockies, following the irregular, twisting course of the Colorado River. Their only sighting in the time they had been aloft had been another U.N.C.L.E. search plane. There had, of course, been no sign of Dr. Sagine.

The radio crackled. "Attention, all Squadron B- units. Attention, all Squadron B units. Report your positions immediately. Repeat. Report your positions immediately. Urgent. Red Line urgent."

The sound of Waverly's voice jarred Solo into sudden wakefulness. He sat erect, shaking his head. The pilot, a gaunt, slackjawed Scot named McDuffee, reached for the microphone.

"Control, this is B Leader One reporting. Heading south-southwest, search course above the Colorado River. We have just passed over Grand Canyon, approaching the Nevada border. Over."

There was no instant response. Solo, listening attentively, heard the other U.N.C.L.E. jets relaying their positions. After a moment, Waverly's voice boomed again. "B Leader One, this is Control. Alter your course point-zero-six degrees, due west, full maximum speed. Place all emergency rescue equipment on stand-by readiness. Your destination is Lake Mead. Acknowledge, please."

"Roger, Control," McDuffee said. "What's the exact position?"

Waverly told him what it was. "How long will it take you?"

McDuffee checked his instruments quickly. "Ten minutes, sir," he said. "We're on our way."

Solo grabbed the microphone. "Mr. Waverly," he said. "This is Solo in B Leader One. What's going on at Lake Mead?"

There was a brief pause. Then Waverly said, "Mr. Solo, I thought you were still convalescing. But I am glad you are along. We may need your assistance."

"Lake Mead is formed by Hoover Dam," Solo said. "That's where you sent Illya this morning. What's happening there?"

Waverly said: "I have been trying to raise Mr. Kuryakin on his communicator, but there is no response."

"You think he's hurt, then?"

"Possibly," Waverly said "Though I think not. I don't want him to land on Lake Mead, but I can't reach him."

"Why the rescue equipment?" Solo asked. "And why the urgency?"

"Simply because," Waverly said, his voice tinged with impatience, "if Mr. Kuryakin does not get off the surface of Lake Mead within the next few minutes, he is going to be trapped on a rushing torrent of fresh water instead of solid rock salt."

Solo got it then, touching his mind like an electric shock.

"Good Lord!" he said slowly. "The antidote!"

"Precisely," Waverly said. "It was introduced into the Colorado some time ago at the THRUSH site in Pardee. I have had planes watching its progress. Even in controlled amounts, it decrystallizes the water at a fantastic rate of speed. Most of the Colorado has already been returned to its original state.

When the water carrying the antidote reaches Lake Mead..." He paused. "I am sure I needn't explain further."

"No," Solo said. "How much time have we got?"

"Approximately fifteen minutes, maximum, according to the present rate of change. We have to make contact with Mr. Kuryakin before he gets too far away from his helicopter."

"And if we can't?"

"Then I am afraid his fate will be in your hands."

"But it's going to take ten minutes to reach Lake Mead," Solo said. "That only leaves us five minutes to launch a rescue operation. That's not much time."

"I am well aware of the time factor," Waverly said. "We can only hope that Mr. Kuryakin can be raised on his communicator before that necessity arises. Keep your own communicator open to Channel D. If he answers too late to escape by helicopter, then you will have to take over with rescue instructions."

"Yes, sir," he said. "Solo out."

He replaced the microphone, rising. As he did, he saw they had lost altitude. Through the windshield, he could see the Colorado River below, no longer white, now cold and surging through the rock canyons toward Hoover Dam and Lake Mead. He wet his lips, turning to McDuffee.

The U.N.C.L.E. pilot was barking orders to his crew on the jet's communication system. He had set the throttle wide open.

When McDuffee finished, Solo said, "I'm going to supervise the operation if it's needed. See if you can set a new speed record, will you, Mac?"

"As good as done," McDuffee said, but his mouth was tight.

Solo left the cockpit and hurried through the plane to the tail section. He took his communicator from his pocket as he went, thumbing out the antenna. He reported to Waverly on Channel D that he was waiting on stand-by.

Illya Kuryakin still had not acknowledged.

Solo reached the tail section. The crewmen there were already setting up the newly-developed U.N.C.L.E.. aeronautical rescue devices carried in that section. He stood watching them, feeling a tightness in his chest as he listened to the silence from the communicator in his hand.

TWO

Ahead of Illya as he ran, the THRUSH scientist was following a straight course toward the rock-covered shore to the right. Illya Kuryakin had narrowed the distance between them to a hundred feet, and was gaining rapidly. He was younger, more agile, than Dr. Sagine, and he knew that it would only be a matter of seconds before he overtook him.

And that made him careless. He forgot about the gun Dr. Sagine was carrying. In his pursuing dash across the shining salt floor of the lake, Illya's mind was focused on only a single objective, and that was catching the man in front of him before he reached the cover of the shore. He had pushed the existence of the gun completely from his mind.

When Dr. Sagine suddenly halted his flight, turning abruptly, Illya did not immediately understand why he had done so. He slowed himself, a natural reaction, and then he saw the THRUSH scientist's arm stretch out in front of him, and the transitory view of metal, and he knew, almost too late, what the reason was.

He flung himself to the side, his left shoulder connecting solidly with the grainy, unyielding surface, jarring him. The bark of the gun in Dr. Sagine's hand split the morning stillness, and a bullet furrowed salt near Illya's face, spewing brackish chips at his eyes. He rolled twice and came up on to his

knees, trying to see where his assailant was, his special held up in his hand. The gun roared again, directly in front of him.

Sagine's second shot took Illya high in the left side of the chest. The force of the impact stunned him, driving him over onto his back. His chest went numb. He lay there, looking up into the pale yellow ball of the sun, and he thought dazedly, He shot me. I'm hurt bad.

There was another crack from the gun. The shot missed. Illya was aware of that, and aware at the same time that he was completely at the mercy of Dr. Sagine. The initial shock wore off, and his mind was alert again.

He tried to raise himself into a sitting position, couldn't with the lack of feeling in his chest, and leaned onto his side with a lunging effort. He saw the THRUSH scientist approaching him, shouting unintelligible words that were lost in the breath of wind blowing across the surface of the lake. He steadied his right arm and squeezed off two wild shots, unable to aim properly from the huddled position he lay in.

But the fact that he had managed to fire at all accomplished a purpose. Dr. Sagine stopped, uncertain. He realized Illya Kuryakin was not dead, and realized as well the foolishness of walking into the muzzle of the special held in the U.N.C.L.E. agent's right hand. He turned and began to run again.

Illya Kuryakin emptied the special after the running man, but at the widening range none of the shots were remotely close. The figure of Dr. Sagine began to grow smaller as he raced toward the rocky shore in the distance.

Illya reached under him, fingers clawing at his pocket. The communicator had gone dead, but maybe it was from Waverly's end. If his own was...The first sharp pain slashed across his chest then, squeezing tears from his eyes. He clamped his teeth down tightly together, pulling the communicator free. Maybe there was still time. If an U.N.C.L.E. jet or helicopter were in the area, it was possible they might be able to spot Dr. Sagine before he could lose himself in the rocks.

Illya nipped out the antenna, pulling the communicator to his lips. "Kuryakin here," he said, and his voice mirrored the rising pain in his chest.

THREE

Solo was pacing nervously up and down the tail section of the U.N.C.L.E. jet when he heard Illya's voice come over Channel D.

His heart jumped. He started to speak into his communicator, but Waverly was already acknowledging. "Mr. Kuryakin, this is Waverly. Listen carefully. Return to your helicopter at once. Do you understand? Return to your helicopter and lift off at once."

"Negative," Illya said. "Sagine's getting away. He shot me. He's..."

"Shot you?" Waverly cut in. "Are you badly hurt? Are you able to return to your helicopter?"

"Negative," Illya said again. He began to cough, and the rest of his words were flecked with the rasps. "Shot in the chest. Don't think I can move. But I'll be all right until you can send someone down for me. Sagine is..."

"Sagine is unimportant," Waverly said tersely. "He won't get far. You are of primary concern at the moment."

"Told you, I'm all right," Illya said.

"You are not all right, Mr. Kuryakin. The chemical antidote has been introduced into the Colorado River. I was attempting to tell you that when my mike went out of order. In another six to eight minutes, the antidote will reach Lake Mead, decrystallizing the salt."

"What?" Illya said.

Solo couldn't wait any longer. "Illya, this is Solo," he said into the communicator.

"Napoleon! What are you..."

"I'm in one of the Squadron B jets," Solo said. "We're on our way to you. We have a grappling sling ready."

"Grappling sling? But there's not enough time for that!"

"Just hold on," Solo said. "We've got time."

"I don't even see you yet," Illya said, and Solo knew he was scanning the sky.

Solo caught up one of the jet's microphones hanging on the wall. "Mac, this is Solo. How much longer?"

"Lake Mead, dead ahead," McDuffee said from the cockpit. "Two minutes."

"Can you see what point the chemical change has reached?"

"Hang tight," McDuffee said. "I'm taking her down."

Solo felt the jet begin to nose dive. He had a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, but not all of it was due to the sudden drop in altitude. The jet leveled again.

"I see it now," McDuffee said. "Man, that's some sight. It's moving forward like a wave."

"Where, Mac? Where is it?"

"A couple of miles behind us, now," McDuffee said. "We're over Lake Mead, approaching the position."

The communicator in Solo's hand crackled. "I can see you now!" Illya's voice yelled. "You're coming right at me!"

"Mac, hold her steady," Solo said in the jet's microphone "We're on target."

"I can see the helicopter now," McDuffee said.

"What's your altitude?"

"Seven-fifty."

"Take her down to five hundred."

The jet dipped.

"Do you see Illya?" Solo asked.

"Not yet," McDuffee said. "There's a man running across the surface to the left, toward the shore. But I... Wait! I see him now! Two hundred yards from the helicopter!"

"All right," Solo said. He was aware that perspiration covered his body. He rubbed wetness from his forehead. "Get set, Mac. I'll give you the word when we're ready."

"Roger," McDuffee said. "I'll start circling."

"Mr. Solo, this is Waverly," the U.N.C.L.E. chief's voice said over the communicator. "How much time have you?"

"Plenty of time," Solo lied.

"Can you see me?" Illya said. His voice seemed to have gotten fainter. He was still coughing.

"We can see you," Solo answered. A thought struck him. "Illya, you're not going to pass out?"

"No, I don't think so," Illya said feebly. "But my chest is on fire."

"Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "Sign off for now. You have work to do. I will maintain contact."

"Yes, sir," Solo said. "When we're set, I'll come on again."

He put the communicator in his pocket, looking at the two crewmen. "Ready with the grappling sling?"

"Ready, sir," one of the crewmen said.

"Get the door open."

The crewmen unlatched the jump door on the left side of the plane. Cold wind howled through the opening, chilling the sweat on Solo's body. He shivered, looking out. Below him, he saw the white salt surface of the lake, and then, as they passed in a tight circle, the still form of Illya Kuryakin, lying prone there.

Solo looked at the grappling sling they had set up on a succession of steel pulleys in front of the jump door. It was a series of plowsteel cables, running through the pulleys, and attached to a ten-foot square piece of reinforced plastic nylon. Above the nylon, fastened onto the cables, were sliding metal hooks, manipulated by drawstrings from inside the jet. Running through the square of nylon at the edges, and affixed to the bottom of the hooks, was a thick, elasticized fiber cord.

When the victim to be rescued was safely onto the nylon square, the drawstrings were pulled upward, lifting the hooks and pulling the nylon closed at the top, somewhat like a fish net, so that there was no chance of the victim falling from the sling while the cables and pulleys hauled him into the plane.

This enabled rescue to be successfully made of unconscious individuals, as well as conscious ones. The entire unit, had been developed and perfected by U.N.C.L.E.

It was, in itself, foolproof. However, if the lowered sling, due to wind conditions or other elements, were to miss its target on the first pass, the plane would have to circle and make a second, or third, attempt. The operation required precise timing, and offered little margin for error, especially in a spot such as the one they were faced with now.

Solo knew that if they missed on that first try, there would be no opportunity for a second effort.

"All right," he said to the crewmen. "Get ready to drop the sling."

The crewmen hoisted the sling, poising at the door. Solo went to the microphone and lifted it from the wall. "Mac?"

"Yes?"

"All set?"

"All set."

Solo took a deep breath, releasing it slowly.

"Let's go," he said.

FOUR

Illya Kuryakin lay looking up at the U.N.C.L.E. plane circling above him. He heard the droning sound of the jet engines, but there was another, somehow louder, sound that came from upstream, at the western end of the lake. He was able to identify that sound instantly... Rushing water.

He looked there, across the shimmering white. At first, he saw nothing. The rumbling hiss of the water seemed to grow louder. Then he saw a fleck of foaming color that seemed to gain size, moving rapidly nearer.

The pain in his chest had climbed into a raging inferno. He saw numbly that the front of his mackinaw was covered with blood. Nausea bit into the back of his throat, and he felt his eyes becoming heavy. A warm lethargy took hold of his mind, pulling him downward, pulling him .

He tried to concentrate on Mr. Waverly's voice, talking to him through the communicator he held clenched tightly to his ear. But the words seemed to low together, melt into a buttery monotone of soothing sound. He felt

himself beginning to relax, allowing the warm feeling in his mind to spread, to...

"Illya!"

The sharp tone of Napoleon Solo's voice snapped him out of it. "Yes, Napoleon?" he said weakly into the communicator, biting his lip against the fire in his chest.

"We're dropping the sling now," Solo said. "We've only got time for one pass, and we've got to make it fast. You'll have to grab onto the sling if we miss the scoop. Are you all right?"

"Fine," Illya said. He tried to make his voice light, but it didn't come off.

There was silence for a moment. Then Solo said, "We've dropped the sling. Can you see it?"

Illya looked up into the sky. He saw at first only a bright, yellowish haze. He shook his head. His eyes focused. He saw the U.N.C.L.E. jet circle, banking above, and then come in from the east, flying low. He saw the grappling sling, suspended on the plow-steel cables. It floated some twenty feet above the surface of the lake, almost directly below the plane. The wind didn't have much effect, due to heavy weights strategically placed on the cables.

"I see it," Illya said.

"Are we in a direct line-above you?"

"Yes," Illya said. "Maybe three hundred yards."

He heard the sound of the water again. It seemed to be almost on top of him. He forced himself not to turn and look there. He kept his eyes on the U.N.C.L.E. jet and the grappling sling.

He was aware of Solo's voice, speaking to the pilot of the jet. "Cut it down, Mac. All the way. We're almost above him. Steady, now."

"Hurry," Illya said. It was all he could say.

The jet flew right above him. He saw the billowing white nylon of the sling, skimming across the top of the surface toward him. With every ounce of strength and will power left in his body, he forced himself to rise onto his hands and knees. The roar of the jet overhead and of the approaching rush of water was a cacophony of maniacal sound in his ears.

The square of nylon on the grappling sling seemed to be coming at him at tremendous speed. He steadied his body, fighting off the urge to duck away. He felt the warm taste of blood in his mouth, and he knew, without feeling, that he had bitten through his lip.

The impact of the nylon almost knocked him over. But he threw his body forward, pain screaming like a living thing in his chest, hands clutching wildly at the nylon. He caught onto the edge of it, lost his grip, and then caught on again. He rolled his body forward, into a ball, the way he had been taught during training for just such an emergency.

There was a sudden jerk, and he knew the drawstrings had been yanked upward, knew that he was safely onto the sling. The nylon pulled free from his hands, closing over him, shutting out the sky.

It had seemed, in that last instant, that he felt a few drops of cold, wet spray on his face. His last impression was of being lifted, swaying, and then he closed his eyes and allowed the warm, welcome lethargy to cover his entire body.

Inside the U.N.C.L.E. jet, Napoleon Solo yelled into his communicator, "We got him! It's all right! We got him!"

From the other end, he thought he heard what might have been a relieved sigh. But Alexander Waverly, in his usual non-emotional manner, said only, "Very good, Mr. Solo. Carry on."

Solo was grinning. "Yes, sir," he said.

He picked up the jet's microphone. "Mac," he said. "Did you hear?"

"I heard," McDuffee said, and from the sound of his voice Solo knew that he, too, was smiling. "That was too close. It's a good thing we didn't need another minute."

"Mac," Solo said, "remind me to recommend you and your crew for promotions. You're the best pilot we've got—bar none."

"True," McDuffee said dryly, and signed off.

Solo went to the jump door, watching the two crewmen using the pulleys to haul the grappling sling into the jet. When they had gotten it inside and loosened the drawstrings, Solo knelt and pulled the nylon aside.

Illya Kuryakin, bloody, was unconscious. Solo bent forward, listening to his friend's breathing. It sounded normal.

Solo closed his eyes, and then opened them again slowly. "Get the first aid kit," he said to one of the crewmen. "We'll have to stop the bleeding, and bandage him until we get back to base."

"Will he be all right, sir?" one of the crewmen asked.

"Yes," Solo said. "He's going to be fine."

He stood then, feeling a mixture of relief, full and complete, and of overwhelming fatigue that had seeped into every portion of his being. He noticed, frowning, that a weakness had set into his legs, and that his hands had begun to tremble.

Solo started to take a step forward. And collapsed. One of the crewmen caught him before he hit the floor.

FIVE

Alexander Waverly said, "I am not quite sure whether I should commend you for your efforts in thwarting the latest of the THRUSH plots, or reprimand you for taking insane chances." He was standing alongside Napoleon Solo's hospital bed.

"You could always compromise," Illya Kuryakin said blandly from his hospital bed. "After all, to err is human."

"Indeed," Waverly said.

"Look at it this way," Solo said. "You won't have either of us to contend with for some time. That should influence your decision."

"It is debatable whether or not that is a blessing," Waverly told him.

"Well," Illya said, "blessing or not, I for one can certainly use the vacation."

"Complete rest," Solo agreed. "Peace and quiet. Ah, sometimes I think this job has its advantages after all."

Waverly looked at his two top agents with what was, for him, some fondness. But his countenance remained stern.

Napoleon Solo: One long, but not too serious, gash on his right leg. Minor frostbite. Pneumonia, though mild, which one of the attending physicians said was the variety known as walking pneumonia, and which he had had for several days. The cold he had contracted in Oregon had, apparently, been the source of the malady. Also, he was suffering from fatigue and a nervous condition brought about by exposure to the THRUSH nerve gas. Diagnosis: Minimum one month's rest.

Illya Kuryakin: Three cracked ribs, still healing. A mild concussion, still healing. A bitten-through lower lip, presently on the mend. And last, but certainly not least, a bullet wound in the chest, which had not, luckily, caused any internal damage to vital organs, but was nevertheless a serious wound that would require supervised care. Diagnosis: Minimum one month's rest.

Waverly wondered, at times like this, if the two of them were indestructible. Whether or not they were, he decided, he was extremely thankful that they were on his side.

He said, "I trust you gentlemen will be interested that one of the captured THRUSH people revealed the whereabouts of the hidden air base that was to be used as the origin point for the distribution of the salt chemical throughout the world. We conducted a successful raid on this base this afternoon, destroying two THRUSH jets and rounding up quite a number of important THRUSH personnel. All in all, a very auspicious venture on the part of U.N.C.L.E."

"And Dr. Sagine?" Illya asked anxiously.

"As you must have suspected," Waverly said, "Dr. Sagine was not as fortunate as you in escaping the waters of Lake Mead. B Leader One reported that Dr. Sagine was caught in the midst of his own creation, and destroyed by it. Hoist on his own petard, if you will. Rather ironic, I dare say."

"What happens to the salt chemical now?" Solo asked.

"It will be turned over to the government," Waverly said. "Perhaps science can find a peaceful, and constructive, use for such a discovery. And since we have the formula for the antidote, we need not worry about THRUSH using it against the world again."

"Then this case is officially closed?"

"Officially," Waverly said. "And now I suspect I should be leaving. U.N.C.L.E. operations does not come to a standstill, even though you two gentlemen do not happen to be there."

"That's odd," Illya said with a faint smile. "I thought that it did."

Waverly cleared his throat. "I shall look in on you again, when time permits. I have no doubt that you will enjoy your vacations very much."

"Immensely," Solo said, stretching languidly. Waverly shook his head sadly, buttoned the collar of his tweed coat, and went to the door. He bid them goodbye, closing the door gently behind him.

Solo looked across at Illya. "You know," he said, "I wouldn't have told Mr. Waverly this, but I don't think I'm going to enjoy this particular vacation at all."

"My sentiments exactly," Illya said. "I would just as soon be dodging THRUSH bullets, for some strange reason."

"We thrive on danger, that's why," Solo said with a grin. "It's our motivating force, you see."

Napoleon Solo laughed softly, rolling on to his side. "Good night, Chet," he said.

"Good night, David," Illya Kuryakin answered as he reached over and switched off the light on the stand between them. A month, he thought glumly. It would be a long time.

THE END

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